

REMEMBERING THROUGH RELATIONAL EXPERIENCE:
FAMILY CONSTRUCTION OF MEMORY IN SEXUAL ASSAULT

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To my family:

I am afraid of what lies beyond this page. The words, thoughts, memories and narratives that proceed these sentences could expose more of our family than I ever planned to do. My relationship with each of you could quite possibly venture into a new direction. All of this scares me. However, words lack the power to say how simultaneously excited and grateful I am for the experiences that you all have chosen to share with me. I am thrilled by the chance to catch glimpses of each of us in each other. My memories of the sexual assault, that we have all come to avoid, have never truly been mine, and I salute your bravery for acknowledging, with me, the secrets that have never slipped off of our lips. This project could not hold the possibilities that it does without your willingness to travel this dark, uncharted journey with me. I do not know where we will end up or what landmarks we will encounter through the process. Thank you for being a pilgrim on this journey. Thank you for telling your stories interwoven with mine. The pages that lie ahead show the beauty of minds collaborated together to remember trauma and hurt. You, my incredible mother, father and sisters, are my inspiration. I love each of you.

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Abstract

In this thesis, I inquire into the stories and memories of my family and myself, all of whom have experienced sexual assault and remained silent about our experiences. I seek to recognize how our memories and stories are created, shaped, and molded by/with family. This work pursues the importance of sexual assault memory so that we can begin to look more critically at how this memory is (re)presented in/to society and how this representation is formulating the recollection and suppression of specific memories. This thesis examines familial memory of sexual assault to further the societal understanding of sexual assault narrative. In addition, I inquire into my own experiences of memory and seek for this work to move from a specific context to a much larger theoretical perspective.

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CHAPTER 1

WHERE DO OUR MEMORIES BEGIN?

I have laid in bed many of nights dreaming about the possibilities of this thesis. The dreams started off unsure. I questioned whether or not this was a good idea to expose this part of my family. I wondered if I would be met by much speculation from those in the academy. Then I decided these reasons were exactly why I *should* write about my family's experience of sexual assault. So, with confidence, I began dreaming about how this thesis would open up. I thought back to an academic conference at which I presented the first bits of my autoethnography on sexual assault. I remember my mother and my sisters sitting in the audience, and I remember how close and connected I felt with them at that moment. I smiled at the thought of how much dialogue that presentation welcomed into my family. We have finally begun talking about sexual assault at length. That is when I had the idea that my family and I should write a collaborative autoethnography together. We should all share our memories, thoughts, and feelings. So, again confident, I began constructing my thesis prospectus and dreaming about the possibilities that lie ahead. And now it is time for me to begin writing my thesis. I am scared to death. For weeks I have put off having casual conversation with my father because I am afraid of what emotions we/he might feel and what words we/he might say. My advisor and I have met to set due dates, yet I still am filled with fear in pursuing this project. For the first in my graduate career, I am questioning my strength to begin writing and complete a paper.



I begin this thesis project in hopes of creating a space where sexual assault stories can be told and silenced voices can be heard. I inquire into the stories and memories of

individuals who have been sexually assaulted as a child and hope to recognize how those memories and stories are created, shaped, and molded by/with family. I hope to distinguish the importance of sexual assault memory so that we can begin to look more critically at how this memory is (re)presented in/to society and how this representation is formulating the recollection and suppression of specific memories. I will examine familial memory of sexual assault to further the societal understanding of sexual assault narrative and how we communicate about this subject. In addition, I inquire into my own experiences of memory and seek for this thesis to move from a specific context to a much larger theoretical perspective.

Literature Review

Writing about sexual assault can manifest in various forms. Traditionally, social scientists have studied sexual assault in the field of communication through discussion with individuals about their own personal experiences, as Fox did (as cited in Ellis & Bochner, 1996). Spry (1995; 2011) approached sexual assault research through the hegemonic implications of labeling in sexual assault to distinguished her experiences from how society says she should talk about them. Rambo Ronai (1995) extended the view of sexual assault from the individual to include the individual's family and their participation in sexual assault through narrative. In this inquiry, I have chosen to approach this project through an autoethnographic exploration of my own sexual assault experiences, as well as a collaborative family autoethnography that inquiries into familial (re)membrance of sexual assault. With the help of family memory, this is what I seek to do.

The foundational approach that I will use to interpret, understand, and acknowledge the collaborative formation of memory for individuals who were sexually assaulted as

children is an interpretive approach (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011) that focuses on the process by which meaning is created and negotiated. This work seeks to open a new space in the academy for exploring and communicating collaborative memory formation. I seek to recognize the importance of family in an individual's identity and interpretation of sexual assault, and therefore, I turn toward a postmodern interviewing methodology to co-construct realities of sexual assault in a family from each member's perspective. It is in talking with each individual that their presence in each other becomes visible through conversations and dialogue. Stories of sexual assault can be told from many different angles.

This social constructionist approach (Foster & Bochner, 2008) assumes that our reality as we know it is intersubjectively constructed by the understandings developed socially and can be read in various manners. Therefore, one meaning cannot exist without its relationship to other meanings. The language we use and the world we live in are constantly in flux, so we are continuously (re)defining and (re)structuring our sense making of the world and our existence within it. In looking at the world this way, I acknowledge the intersubjective realities that exist in our world, or as Rabinowitz (2000) said, "The exchange of secrets is fundamental to power" (p. 22). As we who have been sexually assaulted look for empowerment in telling our stories, we must turn to the people around us for meaning and memory building. It is vital to consider our experiences in relation to others as we tell the stories of our past. Together our narratives exist.

Method in the Madness

This project will engage in two automethodological approaches (Pensoneau-Conway & Toyosaki, 2011) which create a space where praxis-oriented ethnography can join personal narrative in the process of recollecting memory. In these two approaches of autoethnography

and relational autoethnography, I seek to highlight the importance of personal narrative and its relationship to larger social and theoretical issues. I hope to not only present personal experience of sexual assault, but also to illustrate the familial experience through the combination of these dynamic approaches.

To centralize the importance of personal narrative in memory (re)collection, autoethnography serves to perpetuate the thick description (Geertz, 1973) of one's life in relation to cultural phenomena. This automethodological approach allows researchers to submerge themselves in the research and function both as the researcher and the researched. In addition, Bochner (2007) emphasized that the focus should not be on *what* one remembers of the present and the past, but rather on *how* one remembers these things and how this remembrance forms a narrative of its own. I believe that through the sharing of our own stories, wounds, and fears, the larger narrative of society, and its overlapping systems, may be partially revealed. The ground-up quality of this project is essential to its productivity and formation because the autoethnographic style will direct this paper from a specific context to a much larger theoretical perspective.

In addition to the autoethnographic personal narratives of this thesis, I seek to engage a relational autoethnography (Ellis & Rawicki, 2013) that collaborates (re)membrance and allows me, the researcher, to evocatively show and tell the lived experiences of my family through shared memories and storytelling. My primary approach for this research is personal narrative based autoethnography, including relational autoethnography because it is the best method to understand the foundation of narrative and how it is told from different perspectives. As Poulos (2009) suggested,

I have discovered that families and other close, enduring relationships often suffer in silence and thus lapse into secrecy as a result of these traumatic moments, and that, in general, researchers have not found ways to uncover anything more than the dysfunctional dynamics of the secrecy. (p. 48)

Understanding this concept makes way for relational autoethnography to function in this inquiry to reveal the secrecy of my family memory in relation to my personal experience with sexual assault.

Because this inquiry is probing the occurrences of memory and how I recall these memories, it is important to construct multiple perspectives of the events that occurred following the assault, as to weave together the (re)collected memories. While relational autoethnography serves to (re)tell stories that I may not be able to recall on my own, the autoethnographic lens highlights the idea of the memory's origin coming from me, both the subject and the researcher. With that said, in my thesis work, I will engage in family relational autoethnography to support this inquiry and to articulate further the depths of memory deprivation and (re)collection.

In the relational autoethnography, I interactively discuss the assault with family members at which time both family members and me will contribute memory, thoughts, and emotions. This approach is akin to interactive interviewing. Ellis and Berger (2003) suggested that interactive interviewing is particularly useful when the researcher is examining a personal and/or emotional subject that calls for trust among participants. Therefore, I find this method to be a beneficial contribution to this inquiry, as the stories recalled together are compelled by the (re)collection of individuals in each other's presence. Ellis and Berger (2003) noted, "By seeing myself as a subject as well as a researcher, I am

able to move from the distanced observer to the feeling participant and learning things I could not learn before, both about them and me” (p. 167). I (re)collect this inquiry into sexual assault from multiple origins.

I design this engagement in relational autoethnography to help immediate family members understand their thoughts, memories, and perceptions of sexual assault. In turn, through the collaborative memory of family, I hope to further inquire into my own memory perceptions of the assault. Relational autoethnography allows for interactive dialogue and provides a space where memory may be multivocal. By the exchange of emotions, ideas, and memories, this relational autoethnography endeavors to show the interpersonal and the intrafamilial fragments of memory present in sexual assault.

(Re)Focusing Our Memories

For some, memories come in abundance. For others, memories are blocked and hidden from our consciousness. Memories can come in scarcity and they can also come in plethora. No matter the variation of memory, Poulos (2008) reminded us that memories are not something that we can contain. Rambo Ronai (1995) expressed the importance of memory and conversations about these memories in conjunction with the understanding that many children who have been exposed to sexual behaviors do not have a vocabulary capable of expressing what they have seen. It is, therefore, essential to combine these understandings to realize that while something is uncontainable we often lack the know-how to express this. Considering the difficulties a child may experience in talking about sexual assault, we can come to understand the importance of family involvement in (re)membering and speaking out. For some of us, it can take years to develop and connect a vocabulary capable of expressive language about sexual assault, so the time lapse between the assault and the

moment of verbal exposure can be lengthy. This is why memory is vital to recalling sexual assault. This thesis inquires into the memories of both the individual and the family to connect the emotions, thoughts, and recollections of each person so the familial structure may construct thoughts and dialogue regarding the sexual assault.

Layering Accounts

How does one begin to put thoughts about memories into a solidified form on a sheet of paper? How can I possibly write something legible that even slightly reflects the emotions, thoughts, memories, confusion, and hurt that I feel inside of me? Poulos (2008) recognized that it is not possible to contain a memory, yet here I sit trying to put memory between one-inch margins in size 12 font on a sheet of 8.5 x 11 copy paper. I seek to find a place where I can write the messy thoughts inside my head. Rambo Ronai (1995) offered the layered account that gives us an impressionistic sketch, allowing readers the chance to experience layers of thought so that they might be able to fill in the blank spots and construct their own interpretation of the writer's narratives. In this method I find a messy space to share my messy memories in their messy non-chronological appearances in my life. Marcus (1994) presented the idea of a messy text as an avenue for writing against academic structure in order to give a truer look into the lives being studied in ethnography. How can one possibly put into order thoughts that (re)appear in unexpected and sporadic moments? How does a family whose contemplations, which are sometimes simultaneous but often scattered, even begin to understand how their memories are not independent of each other but rather survive on their interdependency? By means of writing through a layered text, this thesis strives to recognize the interwoven nature of memories and their fluidity in history. The layered account is applicable to the pieced together nature of memory.

In addition, writing a layered account allows this work to simultaneously exist as both theory and method, creating a space where narratives can function both as stories of our lives and supplemental understanding of how memory functions. Rambo Ronai (1995) recognized the coexistence of method and theory when she told us, “A layered account is a postmodern ethnographic reporting technique that embodies a theory of consciousness and a method of reporting in one stroke” (p. 421). As we experience life in layers and remember it in layers, I write also in layers.

Often in life, we limit our vision to what is on the surface. We see stories in newspapers, we see reports on television, we see pictures from our childhood, we see old cards and letters—but we overlook the holes in our life, the spaces where memories form, the crevices that old narratives hide in and the caves where loss grows. We see what society sees, but we do not see what the individual sees. For me, writing about loss, writing about the missing fragments of memory, is not only central—it is vital. When we explore the unknown, the forgotten, the unseen, the misplaced, and that is when we begin to discover what an idea is, who a person is, what a concept has become. For me, reading between the gaps in life, between the theories of existence and between the truths one tells is where we truly (re)discover memory. This writing will recollect those holes, those blank spots, those spaces, and embrace the gap in memory that so often occurs for children and families who have experienced sexual assault. In between the lines I tell my life’s purpose (Rambo Ronai, 1995).

(Re)Ordering Order

Order—something that we strive to maintain, something that we seek for consistency, and something that we follow in patterns. Order is both a blessing and a curse for me. I strive

to live in order, but my memories and my thoughts are scattered and sporadic. I seek to follow the rules and do what is asked of me, but yet I find myself indulged in methods of writing that do just the opposite. I try often to make my work fit molds, but I know in my heart that there is no steady mold for the life of a person who was sexually assaulted as a child. There is not set standard for a family who has experienced sexual assault. There is no pattern for how we talk about assault. So as I sit here perplexed about the structure of this thesis, I realize that the typical, the norm, the usual will only prohibit conversation (Richardson, 2000) about sexual assault. So in this messy web of memories and thoughts, I find inspiration from Rambo Ronai (1995) when she said,

By attempting to organize articles neatly into literature reviews, methods, findings, conclusions and so forth, all thinking is forced into a mold yielding an account of the research process that ignores, indeed counts as irrelevant, issues such as who the research is and what his or her motives are for researching the topic of interest. (p. 421)

While I know the historical separation of researcher and research, I cannot ignore the fact that this separation no longer exists. The need for human emotion and human experience to further inquiries of human communication, interpersonal relationship, and memory are vital. Excusing the researcher's presence in this project would be detrimental to understanding the processes of communication within families. So I jump into this adventure with a rule-breaking, abnormal, atypical method of writing, and it is my hope that the product of this work will reflect just that.

Goals of this Inquiry

Setting goals for this type of inquiry is challenging. I have lost count of the number of individuals who have asked me, “So what is it that you want to get out of doing this kind of project?” I struggle to put words to what I hope suffices as an answer to such a question. I wish I knew the (in)conclusion of this project, but it is only through time and conversation, the listening to and remembering of memories that I will come to understand how sexual assault changes the way that a family communicates and functions. Although specific outcomes cannot be predicted in such a space, many goals animate this inquiry and serve as constant catalysts to understanding the importance of memory. My ever-present participation in this inquiry is essential to the motives that drive this work. Though my writings of sexual assault began as an individual project of release and healing, my family’s desire to share in this process motivated the work of this thesis. In embracing the desire of my father, mother, and sisters to work through our past, the goals of this thesis emerged.

Throughout this project I first seek to understand how the self is essential to understanding one’s position in the world. Spry (1995) offered a liberatory epistemological approach which she defines as liberation of ways of knowing, of exploring how we know what we know, the discovery of a “room(body) of one’s own” (p. 29), a site where a woman might tell a story of sexual violence where she—her body is—the locus of meaning for her experience. For me, a woman’s body is where her story manifests. It is through the release of this manifestation that our stories come together in society. Understanding this is vital so that the body is not dislocated from experience, rather it is the site from which her intimate narrative emerges. By telling one’s own story from the perspective of the mind-body relationship, knowledge is (re)presented as product of that body, and, therefore begins to

liberate the woman in the defining and retelling of her story. Therefore, my epistemological orientation throughout this thesis is intersubjective, which assumes that as individuals we cannot separate ourselves from what we know. In this, the researcher and the subjects are interdependent and inherently linked. In addition, the researcher's values are inherent in all phases of the study. This inquiry is not only a product of the research but rather slivers of my life in the study.

Second, I seek to explore the origins of memory and how these origins come together to function as a collaborative effort in family memory. By embracing the thoughts, opinions, and experiences of each family member through this experience of sexual assault, I hope to begin to grasp how each person remembers in his/her own way and when individuals collaborate these thoughts together, family memory comes into play. In addition to understanding the self and one's position in the world, it is vital to seek the importance of family participation in the (re)collection of the past. Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Went, and Leathers (2008) suggested that we should "champion the emerging connections that we embody... Our experiential connections drive our investigation" (p. 60). Therefore, the methodological approach I am engaging to study sexual assault development through family interaction is an interpretive approach that relies heavily on naturalistic methods such as interactive family dialogue.

Langellier and Peterson (2006) inquired that "family storytellers and listeners are multiple and dispersed, and stories may be contradictory and incoherent or simply bits of memory, speech, and image" (p. 110). Because family memory varies and impacts the individual, family dialogic engagement will be an integral part of this research in addition to the memories and comprehension of my own past and present behaviors, experiences, and

encounters. In shaping our own memories, Widerberg (2011) reminded us that memories are intersubjective and shared among families; therefore they are intrinsically about our identity and constitute a highly subjective area. With the inclusion of family dialogue, this body's naturalistic form is (re)discovered through memory formation and (re)collection of both the individual and the family members alike. If we can (re)collect and use our bodies to narrate our stories, then it is possible that our society will begin to see what we can both find and lose memory while collaboratively, with family members, tell our narrative of sexual assault.

While individual goals have emerged for the exploration of memory both in the individual and in the family, I feel it absolutely necessary to recognize that these two have never nor ever will be separate entities. Others will always be a part of my thoughts, opinions, and memories just as I will live on in fragments and slivers embedded in others. We have no organic thought that we can fully claim as our own, only thought foreshadowed by the experiences that came before. While it is vital to understand how memory suppression and (re)collection functions within the individual and within the family, my third goal for this thesis is to embrace the interconnected of the individual within the family and the family within the individual. Bochner, Ellis and Tillmann-Healy (1997) told us, "To have or be in a relationship is to have or be in a story and, usually, to want to tell about it" (p. 17). Working through the multi-dimensional aspects, perspectives, meanings, and relations associated with sexual assault is necessary in order for stories to actually be told in partial totality. Although memories and stories will never be complete, whole, or finished, nor would I ever be comfortable thinking that I could have such power to do so, I do believe there is significance in understanding multiple facets of an experience. While I will never fully be able to grasp the emotions, feelings, and thoughts that overwhelmed my family in our experience with

sexual assault, we can all (re)connect with emotions, feelings or thoughts that we may have once felt throughout the past 16 years since the assault. Part of being in my family is sharing in life together, and it is this sharing in remembering that motivates this inquiry.

My final research goal for this inquiry is to begin to peel away some of the silencing layers that hide our courage to talk about sexual assault. So often in our society, individuals who are sexually assaulted are marginalized beyond their experiences by the expectation of silence to persist following their assault. I find in my own life that much psychological, social, and emotional damage has been inflicted by this blanket of silence that hides and suffocates those who have experienced sexual assault. I hope that through the conversations of my own family in this thesis that others can find empowerment or motivation to speak up and speak out. Although individuals who have been through sexual assault have typically been taught silence by society, I seek to expose the dangers in this practice and propose an increased dialogue of various voices both in familial structures and beyond. By embracing the power of voices, I hope to launch individuals into remembrance of their own experiences creating a space where the importance of sexual assault memory can be distinguished. This will allow us to look more critically at how memory is (re)presented in/to society and how this representation is formulating the recollection and suppression of specific memories.

The Shallowness in not Recognizing Deep Work

“What is your thesis about?” All 22 aunts and uncles have asked. All my grandparents, cousins, friends, friends’ parents, professors, bosses, and even strangers on the street have asked. Some days I even ask myself the question, as I sit writing this thesis. “Why would anyone choose to write about such a dark topic?” Everyone asks. “How did you even come to write about sexual assault? What type of research do you do on this kind of subject?”

Are you going to interview families that have been through this?” My answer is always the same, “Your surprise at this topic is exactly why it needs to be written about. We don’t talk about sexual assault enough. I have begun visiting with my immediate family about our experiences with sexual assault and that is where this thesis originates from.” The dismay on everyone’s faces is always the same, whether my narrative of sexual assault is new or old news to the questioner. I’m always greeted with a soft, brief response of, “Oh, wow. That is quite a project you have undertaken.” I find myself smiling bigger and bigger each time I hear those words and I feel as though I have won a small victory. One more person in this world is now thinking about the possibility that sexual assault is not a taboo subject and it is something that we all can and should talk about. Research Goal #4 – check.



Stories are both something we both forget and remember. For some, memories can retell stories that have slipped into nonexistence. In Chapter 2, my autoethnographic personal narratives piece together disjointed memories from my life as a child who was sexually assaulted to an adult who is continually reminded of the assault. Through the fragmentation of one’s life we can piece together the theoretical implications that trauma has on a child and its influence on memory recollection and suppression. For me, it was essential to understand my own experiences and memories as an individual, before I could even attempt to remember with family. Although I strongly believe that no story exists in isolation or without other people, I find importance in recognizing position within the stories and memories that surround life.

In Chapter 3, I interweave a messy text (Marcus, 1994) of familial memories and my family’s reactions to remembering are interwoven with our recollections of the days, weeks,

and years following the assault. Working through the experience of talking about sexual assault with my family, we collaborate on our feelings, emotions, and the affects that this experience has had on our lives. Memories that we could have never anticipated began to surface during the conversations that we had about our recollections of sexual assault. Although family members often enhanced the memories of other family members, this chapter shares how our memories moved beyond personal conversations and out into the world. It is in talking and writing, with family and with people we do not even know, that sexual assault develops from a topic that was once taboo into a conversation that we share with many people in public spheres.

In Chapter 4, I present a compilation of remembering stories about remembering stories while writing autoethnography with family and exploring our relational inquiries in the previous chapter. In this chapter I incorporate the method of writing stories (Richardson, 1997) to highlight the benefits in talking through the process of telling stories. Although I had projected goals in mind for this work, I could have never foreseen the insight I experienced while writing with family and writing through memory. Family autoethnography has the potential to, for everyone involved, help discover parts of themselves that have gone ignored or unnoticed. In remembering as a familial unit, families can bound through differences, hurt feelings, connections, and (re)discovered commonalities. Family autoethnography creates a unique space where the telling of stories, answering of questions, and asking more questions, can bring light to the grey areas of dialogue that we have never considered before. It is in remembering together that we find the courage to tell our stories.

In Chapter 5, I revisit the goals that I set for myself in this inquiry and address how I met those goals and fell short in multiple ways. Although we can project what we might find

in conversations with family members, we can never know the hurt, trauma, emotions, and discomfort that others feel until they open up their heart, mind, and voice. Although my goals were essential to the progress of this project, I expanded my expectations and exceeded them by the dialogue that this thesis induced. The beauty in autoethnography is the revelations that are discovered when you have given up on revealing any discoveries. Autoethnography is a treasure chest of thoughts where tidbits of wisdom await their discovery.

CHAPTER 2

(RE)EXPERIENCING MEMORY

For adults who are beginning the journey back into their childhood, recollections of experiences and emotions can be difficult. As a child, sexual assault was something I was taught to forget, not remember. This chapter is a collection of the frustrations I have in remembering my childhood experiences with sexual assault, in addition to the slivers of memory that I can recall. As I explore deeper and deeper into my memory, I have come to understand that it is not an exact recollection that is important, rather the process of remembering is beautiful in itself.



Pretzels. That is my memory—pretzels. The memory is not the hot, August heat beaming down on a West Texas river bank. The memory is not a dinky, old, self-painted camouflage fishing boat that was Dad's prized possession. The memory is not Dad, Beth, and Kendra in their faded orange life jackets, trotting down a mountainous hill to the murky waters of the Concho River. The memory is not the v-patterns left behind in the wakes as the front of the boat points its nose out of the water and takes off. The memory is not what happened next. The memory is not him hastily undoing his belt and dropping his baggy blue jeans around his ankles. The memory is not what stood over my six-year old eyes. The memory is not the sweat on his upper lip as he growled a threat to hurt me. The memory is pretzels. The memory is sitting in the passenger's seat of Dad's two-seater pickup eating tiny twists of pretzels from a wrinkled, old plastic Ziploc bag. The memory is using my left hand to grab the pretzels from the bag while my right hand stayed frozen in a fist, hoisted up into

the air as far away from my body as possible. The memory is silent and unfocused and stiff... so is my mind. Pretzels—that is the memory.



Our life stories shape our memories. Our memories shape our life stories. For a person who experienced childhood sexual assault, both the assault shapes the memory and the memory shapes the assault. Therefore, it is important not only to understand how memory manifests in one's life but also how one's life encourages specific memory compression and recollection. I explore the interconnectedness of memory and sexual assault narrative in hopes that memory remembrance can be understood in new and differing degrees. I ask the question, "How are the effects of childhood sexual assault lived-out through body and memory and what emotions, actions and revelations do they stimulate?" By understanding the small (but very important) concept of specific memory in the mind of a person who has experienced childhood sexual assault, one can begin to look more critically at the system that this person exists within and how this system is formulating the recollection of specific memories. Scholars should not limit research to the digestible and the acceptable, but instead embrace what White (2011) calls "the messy and the ugly," autoethnography can bring research to life (p. 434).



It's 7:35 a. m. Today is Monday and a new week has begun. Mom spends extra time curling my hair this morning. Dad makes eggs, bacon, and waffles for breakfast—my favorite.

My sister yells, "Bus is here," and I run after her to catch the bus.

Once inside I find my usual seat—three rows back and on the right. My seat is empty—not very many kids ride my bus. I sit down, put my backpack beside me, and we're off.

It's just another day.

After what seems like hours, the bus slows to a roll for our final pickup of the morning.

The stop sign extends out, the door opens, kids pile on and

then we are off again for the five mile drive to school.

It's just another day.

My juvenile mind wanders. I think about how much I love my seat on the school bus. I am not too far back or too close to the front. I'm in just the right place to see the reflection of the seats in the driver's rearview mirror. My best view is of the boy from a few houses down. I see him every day. This morning I see him there again. I will continue to see him, not just on

the school bus but in my memories, too. Why question it?

It's just another day.

Personal Narrative as a Method

Langellier (1999) writes, "Two or three thing I know for sure, and one of them is that personal narrative surrounds us: pervasive, proliferating, multiplying, consolidating, dispersing" (p. 125). We are in constant motion of making, remembering, forgetting, and re(imaging) stories. The narratives that piece together our lives are essential to understanding who we are as people and how we (re)act in situations. In sharing the meaning of life through the stories that we tell, personal narrative allows us to experience each other in a more personal fashion and creates a place for understanding life through lived experiences. Ellis and Bochner (2000) tell us,

The texts produced under the rubric of what I call narrative inquiry would be stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection,

fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question. (p. 744)

By inquiring into the experiences of ourselves and others, we see the backgrounds of life, not just the forerunning, canonical narrative. I turn to this method of personal stories to experience lives affected by sexual assault within a family. How better can we learn about the influences assault has on a person than to experience the emotions, thoughts, and memories of a person that has lived through sexual assault? While this autoethnography is just one picture of how sexual assault has affected me, it allows us all to hear a voice from a marginalized part of our world that has been silenced for too long. I start from the inside out in understanding sexual assault.



Often times in life, we limit our vision to what is on the surface. We see stories in newspapers, we see reports on television, we see pictures from our childhood, we see old cards and letters—but we overlook the holes in our life, the spaces where memories form, the crevices that old narratives hide in and the caves where loss grows. We see what society sees, but we don't see what the individual sees. For me, writing loss, writing about the missing fragments of memory is not only central, but it is vital. When we explore the unknown, the forgotten, the unseen, the misplaced, that is when we begin to discover what an idea is, who a person is, what a concept has become. For me, reading between the asterisks of life, between the theories of existence, and between the truths one tells is where we truly discover or rediscover memory. This autoethnography recollects those holes, those blank spots, those

spaces and embraces the gap in memory that so often occurs for children who were sexually assaulted. In between the asterisks, my life's purpose is told (Rambo Ronai, 1995).



There is something incredible about looking back that helps launch you forward. As Poulos magnifies (2008), “Memories cannot be contained” (p. 62). For some this backward view is exciting and memorable. For others the view is uncertain and confusing. Bochner (2007) paints the picture of memory when he says,

...we must worry not only about the connection between the present in which we remember and the past of which we remember, but also the relation between what we remember happening in the past and the stories we tell about what happened... (p. 199).

As I reflect upon what I remember of my past and wonder how it's positioned in my life today, I cannot help but speculate where today's yesterday would be the same as yesterday's today.

When we begin to trace stories and memories throughout our lives, we tangle the web of thought. Something about memory is in itself messy. Perhaps it is the recollection of events that have a sense of ambiguity because of their distance. Could it be the hesitation we find in recollection? Maybe it's the remembrance of a past self in contrast with the self that is writing in this moment. Possibly the dirtiness and dustiness of suppressed thoughts being revived makes memory messy. Or maybe memory is just messy because it is simply memory. What is a more fitting way to explore messiness than in fragmented narrative that arises messily in one's life? I design this thesis to be such a “messy text.”

Thoughts and memories, recollections and theory, hopes and confusions are weaved into the fragments of life that comprise this narrative of sexual assault and its presence in family memory. This format provides me with a venue for being conscious of myself in my research and does not force me to “artificially create a sterile objective ‘researcher’ self that is separate from the other selves I enact” (Rambo Ronai, 1995, p. 422). The me that rewrites and retells these stories and memories is the same me who once lived them. I write not only as an isolated scholar, but as a child, a daughter, a person who has been sexually assaulted a student, and a romantic partner. This is a fraction of the collection of stories that remember the forgotten and retell the tale of living through sexual assault.



There’s something about growing up as the youngest of three girls that creates an expectation that little girls must play with baby dolls. I am no exception. In fact, I embraced the idea. Her name was Paige Hannah and she was my mini-me. She had diapers, which I had colored with my brown marker, attempting to make her poopy diapers real. When I bought her, she was wearing a pink onesie, like any good baby doll would wear. She had bottles, stuffed with Kleenexes to portray the milk she drank. She had cousins and sisters and brother and friends and grandparents and a whole life laid out for her. But still, somehow, when mom called to tell me that dinner was ready, I dropped her to the floor and left her behind until the next time I came to play.



I contemplate the memories that represent my childhood in my mind. I think about the hours of laughter my sisters and I shared as we told and retold those memories. I can imagine my family, sitting around the kitchen table, each one of us talking over the others.

It's messy. It's chaotic. It's memory. Then I contemplate the words I wrote in journals, on napkins, in the back of planners and binders, on sticky notes that line the book shelves in my office. I think about the emotion that seemed to seep out of my pen as I wrote. I can imagine the stillness of the room as my words and phrases swirled madly in my mind and seemed to come together into sentences. It's messy. It's chaotic. It's memory.

As I contemplate the piles of memories in my mind, I wonder how does one begin to trudge through the rocky mountains of chaotic memory? Richardson (2000) tells us, "Writing as a method of inquiry, then, provides a research practice through which we can investigate how we construct the world, ourselves, and other" (p. 924). Possibly by me writing, the thoughts and memories, the trauma and the confusion, the heartbreak and the loss I feel can be released, revealed or retold by words on paper. By embracing the method of writing, people who have experienced childhood sexual assault can begin to understand the implications this experience has on their life, their career, their families, their surroundings, and their existence in society. We do not write necessarily to tell, but we can write to cope, heal, understand, and initiate change.



"I bought you something," my mom said as she walked into my bedroom. She lay down a notebook and a small, plastic card. I look down at the items lying on my yellow bedspread, and then I look up at my mom. "I thought that you might want to write things down in this notebook. You know, if anything ever bothers you and you don't feel comfortable talking to me or your dad about it." I look down at the notepad and carefully study its colored paper and the sections that the colors form.

I would never write a single word in that notebook. It was over. Why write about it?



Writing about memory has a bundle of struggles all in itself. We must consider why memory escapes the mind and if this escape is essential and natural and therefore should not be reconceived. We must also project the implications of remembering trauma, disgust, hate, and loss. Bochner (2007) explains this fragility, “The work of memory begins with the activity of remembering a working through and toward the past, making what has been absent come into the present” (p. 62). In addition, I must consider the resurfacing of old memory and their influence to disrupt the present. In writing the past, one must question the future. Santoro (2012) explains,

Locating, interpreting, articulating, and confronting the past is a convoluted process: the following of a trace, the opening of a wound, the reintroduction of ghosts, the indeterminacy of sense-making, the translation of beats into moments, the chance for survival. (p. 120)

In opening this wound, we must understand the possibility of infection, irritation, and discomfort while also realizing the potential for new growth and healing. If there is no consequence to opening a closed door, then what benefit is there in discovering what lies behind the hidden space. I relate with Adams (2006) when he says, “My life feels like the tension between showing and telling; I live through moments of my past that appear without emotional engagement and dialogue; I also live with moments loaded with feeling and conversation” (p. 705). For a person who experienced childhood sexual assault, memory is both scary and uncertain, but for me, the self-expression and realization that is a product of such memory is worth the risk.



“Lauren, you don’t have to tell me the story. Just show me with these dolls what happened to you that day.” I picked up the little girl doll in her pink dress. She seemed strangely different than my little Paige Hannah at home. She had all the same body parts as me. My dolly at home didn’t have that. Then I picked up the little boy doll in his blue jeans and red t-shirt. He had all human body parts as well. I had never seen dolls like these before. I was only six years old, but as I started to unbutton the jeans of the little boy doll, I sensed that I was doing something wrong.



In remembering one thing, we misplace and/or displace another. If one memory stays with you, then it occupies a special place where other memories don’t have the privilege to be. Therefore, in the gain of fragmented knowledge through memory we lose out on others. Santoro (2013) reflects my desire for articulation through autoethnography when he says, “Writing this loss is an act of identifying memories of myself—my body, living in, thinking with, learning from, conforming to, and pushing against culture” (p. 120). Spry (2011) reinforces the idea that what is written from the body changes the body and vice versa – a bid for autoethnography. Through research of the self autoethnographically, my goal is to be able to apply my own experiences and memory to the larger purpose of society and culture in order to encourage self-reflection of others who have experienced sexual assault and to challenge the societal system of victimization that occurs within this demographic.



My two favorite words when I was a child: I forgot.

Lauren, did you clean your room? I forgot.

Lauren, did you put the clothes in the dryer? I forgot.

Lauren, did you do your homework? I forgot.

Lauren, did you brush your teeth before bed? I forgot.



I cannot remember why—

But for some reason I have not forgot—

The stories and emotions retell themselves often—

When I remember to forget them, they stay longer—

When I forget to remember them, they come crawling back—

Sometimes only pieces resurface—

Sometimes new memories appear—

I try to forget to remember them—

But my life remembers they are forgotten—

Nothing is remembered—

Nothing is forgotten—

My body just experiences my life over and over again.



Memory comes in and out of our lives like the wind—sometimes strong—sometimes steady—sometimes sparsely. One’s memory can manifest in the most unexpected times and places, injecting itself into our lives in secretive and subtle ways. Sometimes memory comes with a bang and wakes us up. Sometimes the best way to receive an old memory is to talk about it, to tell stories. In order to centralize the importance of narrative in memory recollection, autoethnography serves to perpetuate the thick description of one’s life in relation to cultural phenomena. According to Adams (2012), autoethnography is “the ability

to use reflexivity, storytelling and aesthetic devices to investigate cultural texts, assumptions about relationships, and premises of human interaction” (p. 182). Gannon (2006) writes that autoethnography originates at the “scene of lived experiences” (p. 475). While this origin is self-implicated, an audience is essential and therefore, we bring the lived story inside to the outside through storytelling and apply it theoretically through autoethnography.



“Memory is presumed to be a kind of knowledge, like perception or understanding” (Bochner, 2007, p. 198). Memory is tricky to work with because what one remembers today, one may not particularly remember tomorrow. What one understands today, one may not particularly understand tomorrow. Therefore, to understand how memory surfaces and diminishes within a person’s life, one must explore the memories that they can recall and wonder why these memories outlasted the others. In this remembering, one must question the truth and honesty that resides between the spaces of yesterday’s events and today’s recollections. Then one must wonder, “How do you constitute truth in memory and is there such a thing? If one’s memory is comprised of the fragments of thought that remain with them, then can one have an untrue memory or is it so that memory is simply a construction of the individual mind?” As we share in narrative together, Ellis and Bochner (2000) tell us, “The text’s meanings are never transparent. There is always a connection being made between the reader’s consciousness and what is being read” (p. 749). Ernest Hemmingway once said, “There is nothing to writing. All you do is sit down at the typewriter and bleed. ” And Bochner (2007) explains, “We bleed not so much because we have to relive, at least in our mind (and often in our bodies), the painful events of which we write, but because of the

obligation we feel to reproduce a truthful account of the past” (p. 198) As we write, we must consider if the truth of the story trumps the power it has to transform.



I can't stand having these discussions with you. No, it is not that I just can't stand them—I hate them. I hate having these discussions with you. My heart is racing, my lungs are closing, and I am shaking from the strength it takes to hold back the flow of tears I am keeping inside, but on the outside I just stare at you blankly. I feel like I am on trial ... like I am on the stand making my conviction. You hover over me as we lay in my bed, with a sense of false power, as though you are the judge of my life stories. Something about your eyes glaring down on me as you force your dick into the zipper of my shorts is nauseating. Actually, it is not just this situation that makes me sick... but “it”—your dick. I despise it. I hate it. I can't even think about it. That's what it is to me... it is “it.” To call it by a name would give it qualities, characteristics that give it life. I would rather belittle it. Your pressure is pressing on me while your body presses mine, too. I try to explain these sudden outbursts of fear and anxiety, but I can't ... maybe I should have sworn on a Bible first, and then you wouldn't have to question my words. You make me feel as though I'm a prisoner in your chambers, and I must have a logical reason for my emotions... but I don't. I simply do not know. I start to cry and you simultaneously roll your eyes as you roll your body away from me. “Forget it,” you say. But I won't forget this. It has become another accusation against me. As if being sexually assaulted was not enough, now you must have control over my body, too. “This is bullshit,” I say. “I don't know what is wrong with me.” I say this half suggesting that something should actually have to be wrong. “Babe, this just happens. I don't know. Something triggers the memory, and I just can't keep going.” You tell me I should

just let it go, so I do. I let it go. I let your bullshit and your judgment and your control go. I let you go. I let all of this go. Now that, that is a conviction.



I understand the importance implied by Bochner (2007) in not focusing on the connections between what one remembers of the present and the past, but rather how one remembers these things and how this remembering is a story all of its own. I believe that through the sharing of our own stories, wounds, and fears, the grander narrative of society and its overlapping systems can be revealed. Hocking (as cited in Peter, 1999, p. 183) said, “I can imagine no contact more real and thrilling than this; that we should meet and share identity, not through ineffable inner depths (alone), but here through the foregrounds of common experience.” For Poulos (2008), “A story told is a powerful thing that can unleash all sorts of grief; an untold story gives off at least the illusion of control” (p. 51). In letting go of control and moving toward a state of vulnerability, the power of one’s story can begin to disseminate through society. I recognize the privilege of my space in the academy (Adams, 2008) that allows me to share my narratives. Knowing that responses to this work from the people of which I have written, are unlikely, I must be ethical in my attempts to (re)tell my memories. Adams (2008) reminds me to that I must be mindful also of the cultural factors that exist which make this narrative a possibility in its oppressiveness. I share my memories and stories with you in hopes that they will be freeing of the bounds that culture encloses to silence the oppressed.



I can still taste the words as they reluctantly slid across my tongue and exposed themselves to the world. I can still feel the knock of my heart beating as if it were waiting

outside a closed door, scared to go in but knowing that it should. I can still smell the scent of cotton candy perfume that adorned our 15-year-old bodies. But most of all—I can still hear the silence that echoed off the walls and swallowed me up into a cloud of solidarity when I found the confidence to tell my friends about the assault. In that moment, I gathered 9 years of shame, confusion, heartache, and fear, and I gave it all to them. And without hesitation, they gave it right back.

The Reader of Personal Narrative

In working through lived narratives of my sexual assault, there are moments that I find it would be easier to maintain my muted status than to speak out about the silencing of sexual assault. However, this autoethnography derives from a hope to bring voice to others who have been sexually assaulted. Ellis and Bochner (2000) tell us, “The goal is to encourage compassion and promote dialogue” (p. 748). The words on this page, the eyes that scan them, and the minds that absorb them all share in the process of conversation. By talking through personal experiences, we put ourselves in vulnerable positions in order to spark dialogue and encourage voice. Storytelling is my method for inviting you, the reader, into my life (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). You make it possible for the words on this page to walk out of the hidden closet of the academy and out into the world. Through understanding a lived life in correspondence with other lived lives, life can be lived with an understanding of life’s experiences.

By understanding the implications and benefits of memory suppression and recollection, one can begin to discover the words that have so long been silenced. In writing loss, we can find something so new and fresh that fuels the academy into further research of memory formation. With autoethnographic inquiry and the sharing of personal narrative, I

hope to advocate the importance of individual story in theoretical comprehension. In writing, one can find healing. By inviting the reader to become a part of the narratives being shared in autoethnography, Ellis and Bochner (2000) tell us, “The author privileges story over analysis, allowing and encouraging alternative readings and multiple interpretations” (p. 745). It is not important that we all experience memory in the same fashion, but rather it is important that we all experience memory. It is not important that we all have experienced sexual assault to connect with this writing, but rather it is important that we can all connect to the sharing of voice. I emphasize that in recalling memories of sexual assault, I have found my call to further the need for writing through loss to perpetuate the voices of the marginalized group that encompasses individuals who have experienced sexual assault.



It's 7:35 a. m. Today is Monday and a new week has begun. Mom spends extra time curling my hair this morning. Dad makes eggs, bacon, and waffles for breakfast—my favorite.

My sister yells, “Bus is here”, and I run after her to catch the bus.

Once inside I find my usual seat—three rows back and on the right. My seat is empty—not very many kids ride my bus. I sit down, put my backpack beside me and we're off.

It's just another day.

After what seems like hours, the bus slows to a roll for our final pickup of the morning.

The stop sign extends out, the door opens, kids pile on and

then we are off again for the five mile drive to school.

It's just another day.

My juvenile mind wanders. I think about how much I love my seat on the school bus. I am not too far back or too close to the front. I'm in just the right place to see the reflection of the

seats in the driver's rearview mirror. My best view is of the boy from a few houses down. I see him every day. This morning I see him there again. I will continue to see him, not just on the school bus but in my memories, too. He will revisit me often when my body recalls the emotions I remember of sexual assault. He will be there as I play with my baby dolls, forcing me to wonder why some are more anatomically more complex than others. His memory will resurface when I find myself in the embrace of future boyfriends. He will be in my best dreams and my worst nightmares. He will be in my diaries and my journals. He will be in my essays and in my academic work. His face will make appearances. His actions will be regurgitated time and time again. He will show up on my computer screen at work and in the faces of strangers on the streets? Why question it?

It's just another day.



Summary

Sexual assault is not something I experienced in isolation. Although for many years I felt that I was alone in my experiences and that my wounds had been misplaced by the world, I have come to realize that I was only temporarily silenced. It is in my own experiences and memories with sexual assault that I have come to understand my family's roles in the process of coping and healing. As I begin to (re)collect my thoughts about the days and years following the assault, I turn to my family to help me piece together the dark places in my memory. In the following chapter, my family joins me in the journey to understanding just how many stories we can and should recollect, tell, and share.

CHAPTER 3

A COLLECTION OF FRAGMENTED MEMORIES

In this chapter, I piece together fragments of memories recollected in conversation with family. I weave narrative, memory, emotion, and perspective together to tell a story of our experiences with sexual assault. The pieces of recollections that I collaborate through remembering together help me to tell the narrative of a family who has never had a way to speak about their experiences. This chapter is my/our own style of relational autoethnography that creates a space where voices can be heard.



I grew up in an average American family. My parents, Brenda and Glen, were both raised in rural, farming families who worked hard for what they had. Married young, my parents had children early. Beth was the first born and eldest of the three girls in my family. Kendra was born three years after Beth, and then I followed three years later. Each of us has a March Birthday on the same day of the week. From our births, our lives have been lived in chronological patterns. My family has always favored order. Our lives are neatly documented in yearly scrapbooks. When I was a child, we always cleaned our house on a rotating schedule so that each of the girls cleaned a different section of our home each week. Our school certificates and report cards were neatly filed in labeled binders. Our socks were tally-marked according to our birth order so that folding could be done easily and without mix up. And on the wall of the backyard shed, we recorded the number of buckets of pecans that we had picked to ensure that we all did our fair share. So when it comes to recalling and remembering our familial experience with sexual assault, it is frustrating that our sequence of

events is out of order, our thoughts are sporadic, and our ability to (re)collect and move on is constantly hindered.

Ellis and Bochner (2000) tell us that “memory doesn’t work in a linear way, nor does life for that matter” (p. 752). We cannot control the ebb and flow of remembering and dismembering in our lives. We are unable to shut the cover on the scrapbook of 1998. We cannot make a final decision on our emotions. We struggle to maintain stability in the memories recollected in our family circle because the circle seems to constantly be reopened and reshaped as people come in and out of our lives. The distribution of emotions seems unfair at times. I do not want my hurt or experiences to permeate into the lives of my family, but I am constantly reminded that the memory of sexual assault is alive in them, too. I wish that I could bear the burden for us all. Instead we all take on the hurt, the guilt, and the frustration. Bearing the yolk for everyone cannot prevent the (re)collection of sexual assault or the pain of its memories—maintaining structure and control over our thoughts proves to be impossible. It feels as though the assault is ruling our lives and we are merely puppets of our memories. How can a family that has always lived structured ever accept that our memories are scrambled and disordered? There is no order in which to tell of memories, feel pain, and heal wounds. So instead of striving for unreachable order, we have not tried to tell our stories—until now.



My parents and I sit on the tan leather couches that line the walls in their home. For years, my family and I have congregated in the living room and shared many laughs, tears, and frustrations. Life lessons have been learned here. Math problems have been solved here. Breakups have been mended here, and stories upon stories have been told here. If the walls in

this room could talk, I wonder if they would know the stories that my family, and I will share today. I focus in on the black and white picture that stands in its frame on my parent's bookshelf. My sisters and I posed with frowning faces and frizzy hair in old-timey outfits. Mom had insisted that we take black and white saloon pictures while we were on our way home from a family vacation at the beach in the summer of 1998. I recall the wet towels that we wrapped around our necks as we drove because our air conditioner had faltered on the six hour drive home in the middle of a Texas summer. My memories are interrupted by the ding of the doorbell, and I come back to the present as my sisters walk in the door. I take a deep breath and stand up to greet them. We are about to tell the stories that we have avoided for so long.



Toward a Relational Autoethnography

Choosing to write through my memories of sexual assault was a difficult decision. I primarily struggled because of the numerous gray areas that plague my recollections. There are so many stories and emotions that I truly believe are a part of this experience, but my body and my mind refuse to allow them to visit me. In hopes that I could further the healing process and work through the fragments of memory that I was able to recollect, I turn to my family to help me remember. I value the wisdom in our/their story and memory. Bochner, Ellis and Tillmann-Healy (1997) say,

Stories activate subjectivity and compel emotional response; stories long to be used, rather than analyzed; to be told and retold, rather than theorized and settled; to offer lesson or further conversation, rather than truths without any rivals; and stories

promise the companionship of intimate details as a substitute for the loneliness of abstracted facts. (p. 23)

Now, as the memories of my family's relationships with sexual assault start to surface, we can share details, heal wounds, and reveal the secrets that have been locked away for so long.

I turn to the field of communication, where I first found the inspiration to share my stories of sexual assault, to assist me and my family in our (re)collections. I embrace the welcomed polyvocal aspects of the field, and I dig through methods and theories to understand how telling our story will affect its acceptance. Ellis, Kiesinger, and Tillman-Healy (1997) developed a method of interactive interviewing to encompass various researchers collaborating on the examination of a topic to create a coauthored narrative. I take from them inspiration in collaboration but search further. The method of unmediated co-constructed narrative (Bochner & Ellis, 1995) allows participants to write and exchange their stories that they then bring together as one co-constructed narrative. Gale, Pelias, Russell, Spry, and Wyatt (2012) show me how collaborative writing can encompass multiple writers who are not necessarily located together but still join forces to produce a co-authored narrative. This idea of writing in association with others is furthered by the concept of collaborative autoethnography (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2012) where multiple researchers write individual autoethnographies that unite to create a collective analysis. In community autoethnography (Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, & Leathers, 2009), personal experiences brought together by multiple writers can highlight how an emergent community encompasses particular social or cultural issues.

While all of these methods are unique and beneficial each in their own way, I struggle to find a place where my family members, who are not all a part of the academy, will find

security in telling their stories. Ellis and Berger (2003) present me with a method of sharing stories through mediated co-constructed narratives where the researcher may monitor the conversation of two or more relational patterns. This method allows for our various voices in to be heard and weaved together in their process of memory recollection. Throughout the process of remembering as a family and in our relationships, stories were told and shared through e-mails, text messages, phone calls, and oral conversations. I documented my family's words in writing in order to capture the emotion and setting of each moment that we shared in memory. While writing, the documented words of my family often helped me move beyond a blank mind, and reinvigorated my perceptions of the memories of the assault. I find inspiration to braid together their words and thoughts, from Ellis and Berger (2003),

These stories show dyads engaged in the specific, concrete, and unique details of daily living. They cope with the untidy ambiguities, ambivalences, and contradictions of relationships in life and try to make sense of their local situation. (p. 167)

As I focus on the interactions between family members and their narratives, my goal is to embrace this method as a way to co-construct a version of our experiences with sexual assault that would not be possible without the voices of each family member.



Mom

I watch out my bedroom window as his pickup truck pulls into their driveway. His probation says that he is not supposed to be this close to our home. I scramble to the phone and call the cops. Then I wait. The police never come.



“It would’ve been more traumatic if there would have been penetration.” For weeks I have looked at that sentence glaring back at me from the page. I have tried to type it, write it, read it, understand it, but I cannot. It took so much courage to find the strength to ask him to recall the day of the assault. I hoped and longed for an answer that would relieve my fear that he blamed himself. All I got was, “It would’ve been more traumatic if there would have been penetration.” I want to hang my head and cry. I want to scream, “Do you really think that forcing me to touch his penis instead of putting it inside of me isn’t a big deal?” Instead, I sit quietly. I feel numb. I cannot take in anything else that he is saying because my mind is fixated on those words. “It would’ve been more traumatic if there would have been penetration.”



When I began talking with my family about our memories of my sexual assault, I thought that this would be a simple task. They will talk. I will listen. We may shed a few tears. I will write about their stories. Thesis will be complete. Fortunately, for the sake of this work, the process was not that easy. There are so many ways that people can remember. There are so many different memories and perspectives that people can have. Working through our experiences with sexual assault, I have come to understand that it is our everyday memories, the ones that we do not anticipate, that bring richness to our stories. Fitness and Duffield (2004) explain, “Families are dynamic systems comprising complex patterns of interdependencies and expectation. Every family member then is affected by what happens to every other member” (p. 482). I imagine our dependency on each other in recollecting our pasts. I recall the hesitant, wrinkled brows that skeptically agreed to take this journey. I wonder why we have silenced our voices for so long, and I hope that dialogue will bind us

together. Douglas and Carless (2013) say, “We live in tensions, and because our lives, bodies and stories are neither fixed nor finished, we are never certain of where our work will take us” (p. 97). We reflect on the past to launch us into the future where we hope that all families will find the liberation to collaborate.



Beth

Why does she think that this is a good idea? We aren’t all ready to start talking about this. I don’t know if this is my time to begin healing.



Poulos (2009) describes the significance of losing yourself in story and life because, “There is something about getting lost and then getting un-lost that changes you” (p. 52). I think about the ways in which my family and I have talked about sexual assault over the past 16 years. When I was younger, my family seemed to be so remotely distant from the conversation of sexual assault, but today we talk about it more than we ever have in the past. We seem to pop in and out of the memory of the experience; sometimes being completely immersed and other times hardly recollecting its occurrence. One week the assault will seem so real and the next it is vaguely a distant thought in the back of our minds. So then how can we possibly claim to be affected by something that we cannot even recall at times? How can something that has been forgotten for so many years now be a very vibrant and tangible experience? Rambo Ronai (1995) reminds me of our perception of family members’ involvement in our lives, and suggests that our memories of perception affect how we perceive the memories. Poulos (2008) also reminds us that it is not possible to enclose our memories. The fluidity of memory in my family has seeped its way into year after year.

Sometimes there are larger gaps in which the memory surfaces and other times it merely runs beneath the surface. Tears have carried the memories from one decade to the next, and our stories will continue the flow.



Kendra

We lay in our beds tonight in silence. Tears roll down my cheeks and soak the pillow beneath my head. I look over at her, and she is sound asleep with her favorite green blankie wrapped up in her arms. The glow from our night light illuminates the chips in the soft pink fingernail polish that she wears. I muffle my cries as I imagine that someone made her do bad things with those hands. Nobody told me what happened today, but I know that it wasn't good. I try to fall asleep, but I am upset. I know that she is my little sister, and we get to share a bedroom, and I love her... but I don't know what she did with her hands.



Mom

This evening she went straight to her playroom when she got home. Before dinner I went to ask her to wash her hands. She was sitting on the floor of her playroom in the back corner near the bookshelves. Dolls lined the walls of the room as she carefully dressed each one. Hours upon hours had been spent in this room imagining the lives of her fake, plastic baby dolls. Today she seemed to have forgotten about all of them except for one small, bald-headed, little boy doll. As I watched, she slowly removed the blue cotton pants that he was wearing. She ran her fingers over the seam in the fabric between the doll's legs. She seemed

to stare at the doll with an intense focus as her brow wrinkled and she started to whisper, “Touch it. Hold it. Or I will throw you off of this cliff and into the water.” I gulped and she turned around to find me watching. I sent her to the bathroom to wash her hands, and I went to my bedroom to cry.



Kendra

The details don’t matter. I was just so afraid of losing my little sister.



I am intrigued that although my family did not talk about the assault growing up, each of us can and does tell a very similar, dry account of what happened on that day. I wonder if through the years, we have pieced together a stock story that can be told to others if the need arises. Throughout the time that I have spent talking with my family about this assault, I’ve come to find beauty in their memories—not when they recall what actually happened at the time of the assault, but rather how that event has echoed through their lives. Telling our stories and speaking about sexual assault should not center on the details, but it should tell of a family that was impacted by sexual assault and how they responded. Remembering with my family has done just that. The raw words and tears that my family has shared with me have opened my eyes to the tremendous impact sexual assault can have on binding a family together with thoughts, emotions, words and love. Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) tell us,

If an author experiences an epiphany, reflects on the nuances of that experience, writes to show how the aspects of experience illuminate more general cultural

phenomena and/or show how the experience works to diminish, silence or deny certain people and stories, then the author writes autoethnographically. (p. 23)

It is not the words that they speak to me as they tell the story of the assault that makes our sharing special, but it's the words that they speak, when their stories that come from their hearts, that show how beautiful a relational autoethnography can be.



A Relational Autoethnography

As I move toward writing a relational autoethnography of the fragmented memories my family has recollected about sexual assault, I search for liberation in sharing their words, my words, our slivered memories, our boggled thoughts, and the emotions that have driven the process. Ellis and Rawicki (2013) present us with their exemplar of relational autoethnography by sharing the lives of others through evocative stories told in conversation. I, too, turn to relational autoethnography as a method of working through the stories told by and about my family members in our experiences with sexual assault. While I acknowledge the collaborative works of Ellis, Kliesinger, and Tillman-Healy (1997), Bochner and Ellis (1995), Gale, Pelias, Russell, Spry and Wyatt (2012), Chang, Ngunjiri, and Hernandez (2013), Toyosaki, Pensoneau-Conway, Wendt, and Leathers (2009), I grapple with combining fragments of these methods in order to tell the story of my sexual assault both in collaboration with family and through my experiences also. As I imagine the ways that sexual assault memory has been recollected in my life, I find disconnect between those recollections and the structured ways in which sexual assault has been studied in the past. By combining fragments of multiple methods, I am able to share the true fragmentation of memory recollection.

It is the conversations we have had, the text messages that we have sent, the emails that we have exchanged, and the phone calls that filled the calls lists on my family's cell phones that we have begun slowly piecing together our experiences with sexual assault. I find an invigorating attempt at relational autoethnography as my family, and I weave together the vignettes of lived life, dialogic words of memory shared, and shards of struggle in finding voice. This relational autoethnography combines the heart beats of memory and the growing pains of a family coping with sexual assault.



It's just a house. It's just a house. I keep telling myself that it's just a house, but somewhere deep inside I feel that it is more. Not a day goes by that I can get from my house to work without feeling as though the house stares me down from the edge of the highway. Each time I pass, I want to turn and stare back but I keep my eyes glued to the road in front of me. I wonder when the day will be that I can drive past that house and not realize that it is there. I want to set a match to the boards and nails that hold it together, but instead I search for the hope in my future that holds me together. I have never felt such hatred for a house, but that one I do.



As they walk in the front door, I hug my sisters as I do each time that I see my family, and my mom offers everyone a cup of coffee. At the age of 14 I started drinking coffee when I was at friends' houses and soon convinced my parents that we needed a coffee pot, too. Now we gather around the coffee pot each time that we are together, and coffee seems to be a soothing accelerator for conversation. As we settle back down onto the couches in the living room with our matching coffee mugs, I nervously shuffle the papers in my binder as I

attempt to avoid having to begin this conversation. I can feel the eyes of my family upon me as none of us know how to start talking or what to say. I can tell that everyone is uncomfortable, and we gladly hide our mouths and eyes behind our coffee mugs as we drink. “Well,” I begin, “I guess you all are as nervous as I am.” I look from one family member to another as I gather my courage to read some words that I have written to them. Surely, if we are scared to begin talking, then written words can help ease us into conversation.



Beth

Today I sit on the school bus waiting to go home. My school is small, so we only have four buses. Each afternoon the buses line up in front of the school to take us home. I ride bus three. Today as I sit in the back of the bus, and I watch some of the other students. The girl across the aisle from me is hastily eating her Skittles as she hides them in the pocket of her back pack. Two boys in front of me are playing on their Gameboys, which they are not supposed to have. My eyes wander to the gigantic rear view mirror above the driver seat. That is when I see them—the blue and red flashes of a police car reflecting back at me from the rear view mirror. Looking around the bus I realize that other students are starting to notice the police car, too. Within minutes, students’ faces are plastered against the dirty windows of the bus, all trying to see where the police are and why their lights are showering us in red and blue. Later I would find out that the police came to my school because they were arresting one of the sophomores. The rumor is that he brought a can of snuff to school. Nobody ever tells me why they were there, but I know why the police came to arrest him. It is months before I tell my best friend the real reason that the police came to our school. It was then that she realized that snuff does not get you expelled forever. But other things do.



As she normally does, Mom is the first to speak after I finish reading.

“Lauren, we’re proud of you for doing this project, and we want to help however we can.” I urge them to simply just tell me what happened on the day of the assault, and I hope that this time of storytelling can end without tears. Mom begins, “Well, I remember Beth and Kendra walking into the house after they got back from fishing. I wanted to know why you weren’t with them. They said that Dad had to tell me why. They said you would be home soon.”

Kendra interjects, “Yes, but it all started because the three of us girls went down to the river with Dad like we did often.” I pictured my Dad with three girls following behind him, everyone talking at once, the hooks on our fishing poles swinging above our heads, and pigtails bouncing as we walked.

“The neighbor boy went down to the water with us because he was at home, bored,” Dad adds, “There wasn’t room in the boat for all of us so you stayed back with him.” I listen as they talk, but I keep my eyes glued to my notepad as I am scared to see the expressions on their face as they recall what comes next.

Kendra starts, “You were always happy and jibber jabbering but that day when we came back to get you, you were standing there like a frozen ghost.”

Beth adds, “You were standing there crying. I knew something bad had happened.” I glance up from my notepad and see mom wipe a tear from her eye. Dad excuses himself from the conversation and walks back to the kitchen to get another cup of coffee.

“Dad kept telling you to hurry up and get in the boat because you weren’t moving very fast. You got in and immediately told him something. I didn’t hear what you said,” Kendra recalls.

“I was trying to hear what you were saying to Dad, but you were talking really quiet and crying,” Beth tells me, “Dad told us to look forward and not ask questions. He told us we were going home. ” I hear footsteps coming back down the hall and see Dad stop in the doorway as if he did not want to join the conversation. He has a look in his eye that he wants to add to the story, but I can feel his hesitance as he remains isolated from the rest of us.

“Dad, do you remember what I told you in the boat?” I ask.

Dad takes a deep breath and blows the air out of his mouth, “You said that he needed to go pee-pee and he asked you if you could help.”



It is March of 2005. I am in the fifth grade. My friends and I have mastered the art of passing notes. Our futures are planned based on our daily outcomes of MASH (Mansion, Apartment, Shack, House) results. We find it exciting to categorize our futures. We make propositions as to how our lives will end up (sometimes the worst we can think of, sometimes the best). We number our selections on the place we want to live, the car we want to drive, the person we want to marry, the names we want to give our daughters, and the names we want to give our sons. Most of the fun of the game of MASH is to see the selections that your friends choose as the alternate choices of the place you will live, the car you will drive, the person you will marry, the names you will give your daughters, and the names you will give your sons. The gamble of MASH is our favorite way to distract ourselves from the spelling words written on the board.

I sit in my desk in the third row of the classroom. I am a straight-A student, so the teacher rarely expects for me to act up or let my attention wander. My best friend sits directly in front of me, and she sneaks a yellow folder onto my desk while the teacher's back is turned. I open the folder (our method of passing notes that we hope our teacher doesn't understand), and I find my latest MASH results. Today my future reveals that I will live in a mansion, I will drive a taxi, I will marry Brad Pitt, my daughter's name will be Hannah, and my son's name... My son's name... My son's name... I stare at the page. I hope this isn't a cruel joke. I have never told my friends about what happened to me or who was there. But written in sloppy handwriting is the third name on the paper with bright red ink circling around it I see the name that MASH tells me I will give to my son, the same name of the guy who assaulted me—Zane.



Beth

I think about my son sleeping in his bed in the other room. I know that one day I must tell him our secret. He needs to know that he can talk about sexual assault. I wonder how I will tell him. I wonder how he will respond.



As I try to put words on paper to share the narratives my family has told me, I struggle to understand how my audience can best understand these stories. Ellis (2007) said, “Relational ethics requires researchers to act from our hearts and minds, acknowledge our interpersonal bonds to others, and take responsibility for actions and their consequences” (p. 3). In autoethnography, ethics not only presents itself as one of the trickiest and toughest obstacles, but relational ethics intertwines writers with readers. I am not only writing this for

my own sense of healing, but I write for my family—and I write for you. I write to recognize my body in relation to those bodies around me. I write to experience my memories in relationship to the memories that fill our world.

Guillemin and Gillam (2004) introduced two different dimensions of ethical decisions that a writer must consider in sharing narratives and theory. First, we must take into consideration the ethics involved with the procedures. As I began to prepare a prospectus for this thesis to present to the college of graduate studies at my university, I was prompted to consider the Internal Research Board (IRB). I consider the privacy and protection of my family members in their participation in this inquiry. I consider the names and locations involved in our experiences and memories. I make no alterations the truths of our identities and scenes, because I ultimately decide that our individuality as a family is important the memories and recollections that we collect. Ultimately, with encouragement from my family, I find a way to share our stories to the best of our memories and to invite the reader to follow in our aesthetically mundane (Bolen, 2014) lives.

The second dimension of ethics that we must consider is the situational ethics that arise in our work. I was not prepared for the question when a woman stopped me at a football game and told me that she knew I was writing my thesis in collaboration with family members. She told me that I was lucky to have a family who would support my endeavors in revealing family secrets. As she walked away, I again question the situational ethics that arise when others are involved and the stories they tell do not just affect you. Ellis (2007) adds to this list of ethical dimensions by suggesting that a relational ethics should also be considered in our writing. How are we telling our narratives? How are we representing the people in our stories? How do we share our lives with others? Ellis's (2007) relational ethics drives this

thesis to consider the heartbreak, the wounds, the fear, and the secrets of my family. Until now, we have not allowed the flow of dialogue to fill our lungs and carry out the words of our stories, but through this inquiry, that all changes.



Beth

Today we played basketball outside on the carport. She loves basketball and always begs me to play. I intentionally miss shots so that she will win our game of HORSE and I can go back inside where I would rather be. Before we finish, I see his truck pull up into the driveway, and I wish that this game would have ended earlier. There is something about him that I do not like. I look to see if he is walking toward us as she makes her last basket. “You win,” I say, too excited that the game is over. I make my escape into the house and watch through the garage door window as he picks her up and puts her on his shoulders. “Hey dipstick,” he greets her. She smiles a toothless grin and giggles and says, “Hey.”



Beth

I felt so anxious. My heart was beating. I knew something bad happened. I was so pissed at him. He made my little sister cry.



It is 1998 and I am six years old. My blonde hair is frizzled and deranged. My mind will soon be the same. My innocent blue eyes have seen only the immaturities of life and the innocence of childhood. Today I will know more about the male body and the tangibility of assault than most adults ever will. This morning I went to church with my family. Then I

went to Sunday school where I was read a verse from the bible, “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness.” I listen intently. I try very hard to obey.



Mom

She told me that he asked her to take off her shorts, too.



I have always had a fascination with stained glass windows. I can remember sitting in church when I was a child, amazed that I could see the light shining from the outside through the glass. I was even more amazed that when I looked from the outside in, I could never see beyond the different shapes, cuts, and colors of the window. I wonder if my relationships with my family are like the tiny pieces that make up an image in stained glass. Time and time again, I have seen different slivers of personality, different hues of thought, and different angles of perspective. For years, people have looked through that glass, trying to see our family on the other side, but for years, the only thing anyone has seen is no deeper than the glass in front of them.

I have tried to look out of that glass from my experiences inside sexual assault. Most of the time I only see the darkness of the outside glooming behind the glass. On occasion, I have seen the light of hope that someone out there understands what is on the other side of that barrier. I wonder if my family’s experiences, diverse like the shards of glass that make up the window, have come together to give the world a picture of what it is like to experience sexual assault within a family. I cannot help but be annoyed by the grout between the pieces of glass that give structure, much like our society that tries to hold together the image of what sexual assault should be. At times I want to punch my fist through the picture, shattering the

reality that there is even a barrier between me and the outside world. As I sit and write this thesis, I hope that I am chipping away, even if it is a slow process, at the stained glass image others have of sexual assault. I cannot ignore that the glass that encompasses this picture is stained, much like I feel my life has been stained by the presence of sexual assault. I contemplate the beauty of those stains, however, and I appreciate their unique hues of wisdom and visibility that shines from them.



I thought that this project would be unifying. I thought that my family and I would come together and fill in the gaps for each other. I thought that we could demystify the past, but we seem to have only thickened the fog. Poulos (2012) reminds us that our memory is like tiny shards of glass that are too small to be recognized. We get glimpses of scenes and hurt from the past, but we cannot make them out through the thickness of our memory. I realize that none of us remember the same shards of narrative. None of us see them in the same light or at the same angle. Perhaps none of our memories even come from the same piece of glass. For some, this assault seemed to be a threat to their parenting style. For others this assault seemed to be a daunting question mark following them through life. And even for others this assault seemed to be another obstacle to overcome.

How could we all have such different memories of the same day? I imagine how I used to think about the event. I would envision a small glimpse of memory where he yelled at me and told me to do what he said or that he would hurt me. I contemplate the strangeness that not one person in my family recalled a single word of this as we talked about the sexual assault, yet my initial memory is always the threat. Ellis and Bochner (2000) remind us that, “Narrative is always a story about the past and not the past itself” (p. 745). As I talk with my

family, I have begun to realize that our stories are drastically different and reflective of our varying places in life. I see how our different approaches to remembering the past change how we talk about it now. I am reminded of the vulnerability that this project has asked of each of us when Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis (2013) say, “Autoethnographies make choices about which selves and experiences to share as a way of mitigating vulnerability and potential exposure to criticisms” (p. 24). The world around us will always be viewed through lenses, whether it is the lens of a mother, father, sister, or daughter. The eyes of society will consistently change the lenses they cast upon us as our bodies are interpreted and read by others. We must remember that under the view of society and in the midst of hurt feelings is where change starts to happen.



Beth

We were all assaulted that day. Our family changed and we were never the same. Our family will work through stages of healing. Working on this thesis has given us a purpose to talk and a reason to bring up the assault. What started out as “let’s help Lauren” turned into “we are helping the whole family.”



We sit around our dining room table in the same places that we sat 16 years ago. I have never tried to imagine the conversations that my family had with their friends and relatives after this had happened, but Mom offers, “I couldn’t take the pain in telling my parents so Dad and I agreed that we would tell each other’s parents instead.” I look to Dad to see if he has something to add, but he plays with a piece of pecan on his plate. I try to picture my 6 foot 4 inch tall grandfather, who I never got to know very well before he passed away. I

cannot imagine my 5 foot 6 inch tall Dad trying to look up at him and explain what had happened.

Kendra asks, “Did anyone ever tell our aunts and uncles?” I have often asked myself the same question.

Dad continued to avoid conversation so Mom answered, “Yes, I told all of my siblings each separately. It got so much harder each time that I had to tell one of them. I finally asked one of my sisters to tell Lauren’s Godmother because I didn’t think that I could say the words again.” For the first time today, my eyes fill up with tears. I see the hurt in my mom’s expression, and I see the avoidance in my dad’s eyes. “Glen, why don’t you tell Lauren about telling my parents?” Mom prompts Dad to talk.

“Well, I told them. I was really upset after it happened. I drove out to their house and met your Grandpa on the road in his tractor. We stood there, leaning up against the tractor tire, talking for a long time. He just wanted to make sure that there had not been penetration. We agreed that it didn’t make it any easier, but we knew it could have been worse,” Dad tells me. I smile, knowing how much he had dreaded telling me that story, but my eyes run over with tears because I realize how much this had affected my entire family. All of their memories are a bit overwhelming, but I am thankful that they told me. I know that I cannot handle any more stories today, so we spend the rest of the afternoon distracted by other conversation.



She is always the first person I ask to edit my papers. Her feedback will be twice as long as the actual writing that I gave to her in the first place. She writes notes and draws smiley faces. She circles phrases, sometimes even three or four times if she really likes them.

I love to get her responses because nothing warms a heart more than to open an essay and see “WOW” written in capital letters above the header. She is the first person who I took my writings to about the sexual assault. I tried to find a way to talk through my ideas with her. I had never done anything like this before, and I knew that if she thought it was a bad idea, she would let me know. She didn’t turn me down. She encouraged my writing. She told me a few things about the day of the assault that I never remembered or knew. When she moved back to the town where I was completing my Master’s degree, I was thrilled. Having her close would make paper-proofing even easier. Sitting on her living room couch with a cup of peppermint flavored coffee, I decided that I would write my thesis on sexual assault. She told me it was a brave move. She told me that if anyone could do it, it would be me.

So I began writing my thesis. Now she is hesitant. She does not want to talk about the assault with me anymore. I call, I text, and I ask if we can have a cup of coffee, but she is always busy, too tired, or not in the mood. This breaks my heart a little. I want to talk to my sister. She was so supportive and so excited before. I wonder what type of hurt this is resurfacing in her life. It affects us all different. I know that. But I just want to talk. I just want her to know that we can’t be silent about this forever. I want her to realize that other people are hurting, too, because their loved ones were sexually assaulted. I want to tell her that I love her. But I don’t.



After weeks of typing it, writing it, reading it, and trying to understand it, I am still grappling with his words. “It would’ve been more traumatic if there would have been penetration.” From the time that I heard them, those words have hurt me. I fear culture tells us that if it wasn’t extreme, then it wasn’t bad. I fear culture teaches its members that unless

you have scars to prove the pain, it didn't happen. I fear a culture that will not acknowledge my pain but instead chooses to deny the existence of healing. Some may not call it sexual assault, but I do. My body may not have been injured, but I am still hurt. I may not have scars to prove the wounds or memories to prove the event, but it happened and I feel the pain. It breaks my heart to know that society has forced him and many others into thinking that just because it was not the worst, it was not bad. I know he meant me no harm, no hurt, or no offense by his words. I know that he always looks on the positive side, the happy side, and the side on which we all want to be. He is absolutely right. It could have been worse, but it also could have been better.



It is 2008. I got my driver's license today. I am now a mature adult. I can drive myself where I please, and I can leave at any time that I want to leave. I have finished my driving courses, I know how to pump gas, I have bought a tire pressure gauge, and my temporary driver's license is printed in ink. There is only one lesson left to be learned—how to change my oil. We stand in the driveway—the same driveway that I played basketball on when I was a child—with the hood of my 1996 Nissan Sentra propped open. I watch carefully as he measures the levels of oil on the rod that he pulls from my oil tank. He tells me, “This is a dipstick—pretty self-explanatory—you can check your own oil.”

I never pop the hood on my car again.



Autoethnography can be a healing process (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Writing through the wounds, sorrows, and frustrations that have guided our life can bring a sense of relief. So it seems only natural that we would want to share this experience with our loved

ones. For a family that has experienced the impact of sexual assault, writing through the memories, conversations, and silent secrets of the past can bring to light a sense of community and comfort. But what about the gray areas, the disruption of comfortable relationships, and the bitter past that surfaces in families during this type of dialogue? How do we explain the tears that cover our keyboards as we read emails full of words from our family members that break our hearts? How can autoethnography be healing when it seems to constantly bring up more and more tough love, piercing words, and daunting (re)collections? Poulos (2008) suggests, “A story told is a powerful thing that can unleash all sorts of grief; an untold story gives off at least the illusion of control” (p. 51). From a young age, I learned this was something I should not share. I cannot help but cringe at the thought of how silent my family and I have been about our story. For the past 16 years, I have tried to control my past and did so by blocking it out.

I wonder if the emotions that seem to leak out of my fingers as I now type have been collecting inside of me for years. I think about the difficulty I had in finding courage to talk to my family about the assault. I contemplate the uneasiness I feel each time I sit down to write, wondering if this work will harm my family relationships. Being open leaves us in such a vulnerable position. Bringing up the past only furthers the remembrance of its contents. So why do I continue to do it? I do this because I have to. I do this because I don’t know who I used to be. I write because I need to tell the stories. I bring my family along with me because I know that my past is their past and their hurts and feelings are a part of me.



Mom

I sob. I want to talk, but I sob. I sob because I do not know what to say. I sob because there are no words to say how I feel. I sob because it is easier to sit on the end of the telephone line sobbing than it is to say what I need to say. I sob because I cannot mutter the words, “She was sexually assaulted.” I sob because I do not even know if that is the right thing to say. I sob because I have more siblings left to call and search for words to say instead of sob. I sob because it hurts.



It was June of 2013. After ending a relationship which had shattered my self-esteem and concluded with a phone call to the police, I had begun dating another guy. Instantly I felt a bond and safeness with him that I had not previously experienced. However, still fresh with hurt from my previous relationship, I was cautious to move forward too quickly. I wanted my family to like, love, this man and approve of our relationship before I got too far into it. I took the guy (now my fiancé) home to meet my family two semesters before I began writing this thesis. Dinner went as well as any first-time-meeting-the-family could go. Afterward they wanted to take the family down to the river to check the trotline (a baited line of hooks used for fishing). I knew that they wanted my fiancé to experience my family in its most raw sense, and nothing described us better than the outdoors. Still I felt a lump in my throat and my heart skipped a beat at the suggestion. I hadn’t been down to that river, the river where I was sexually assaulted, since the time that it happened. I knew that this was a step forward in the process of healing.

I was surprised at my lack of anxiety once we were down at the river. I experienced a sense of relief and accomplishment that I had not expected to feel. While some of them

checked the line, I chose to walk along the river's dam. It was then that I saw them. Down in the cement below the dam, I saw the handprints of a boy. Below the hands his name was scratched into the cement with a stick. My heart stopped. Those were his hand prints. Those were the same hands that sexually assaulted me. I held back my tears and kept quiet the rest of the evening. I knew it was time to tell my family's secret to my fiancé, but I didn't know how.



There are symbols and signs in our lives that remind us of many things. I never expected for a little boy's handprints in cement next to a river to be a symbol that triggered so many memories. I now think about the relationship that I had with the guy that assaulted me. Although I have never seen him or spoke with him since that event, I know that our relationship and the memories that encompass that relationship still do and always will exist. Bochner, Ellis, and Tillman-Healy (1997) tell me, "Co-created by the joint actions of two people, a personal relationship lives as a contingent sequence of intertwined experiences, given shape and meaning by the stories that form and inform its enactments" (p. 117). Although his life and mine are in very different places now, my relationship with him continues to change as my family and I (re)collect the past. This is not just my story. This is not just my family's story. This is his story too and as I write, memories of our relationship are with me.



Mom

You told your story to a counselor and you told your story to an abuse outreach, but I didn't want you to have to tell it to anyone else. I told them that I didn't want you to have to

speaking in court. I was not going to make you testify on the stand. You had told the story enough. It wasn't fair.



Dad

It's 9:00 p. m. on Sunday evening. I walk down the hall to her room to be sure that she is in bed. "Can we please read *Make Way for Ducklings*?" she pleads as I open her door. I sigh. This is the fourth time this week that we have read that book, but she has already pulled the worn pages of the story from underneath her pillow. I sit down next to her on her bed and reach for the book that she is holding. She insists that tonight she will read the story to me, and I roll my eyes in defeat as the four-year-old opens the book. Page by page she repeats to me the words that I have read to her so many nights before. I know that she cannot yet read, and I am slightly amused by her ability to tell me exactly what is written on each page. When she finishes, I kiss her goodnight and turn off the lights in her bedroom. "Smart girl," I think as I walk back down the hall to get ready for bed.



Stories have always been an important part of my life. I love to read, and I love to talk. But the one story that I have never been able to understand or tell is the story that I am now unsuccessfully attempting to piece together and remember. My family has been instrumental in filling in blank spots, gaps, missing pieces, and fragments that I have never known to be true. This behavior, narrative inheritance (Goodall, 2005; Rath, 2012), occurs when stories are told to children by and about family. Often as children our parents and elders tell us many stories about our lives. Many of our perceptions and values are learned through this story telling phenomenon. Poulos (2013) recognizes that our parents' memories

aid in our understanding of experiences that came before and help us to construct a conception of our childhood. I further this idea by including that our siblings, too, can remember and narrate events from childhood that spur memories inside of us.

Goodall (2005) said, “A narrative inheritance touches everything, one way or another, in our lives” (p. 503). It’s intriguing for me to realize that so much of my memory of being sexually assaulted as a child is based upon stories that have been told to me by my family as a child and, much more often, as an adult. So many of the feelings and thoughts and emotions that plague my mind when I begin to remember the assault are learned and adapted expressions that I have developed through the stories that have been told to me. This thesis itself has been a project of narrative inheritance. The days and months after the assault all exist in my mind because my family has helped me remember.



As I read through the pages of my elementary school diary, I find entries on my crushes, my new school clothes that my mother sewed for me, and my kittens. Most common, however, are entries on fishing. It was always a treat to get to spend some time outside by the water, so it was not unusual for us to head down to the river on a Sunday afternoon. We had no way of knowing that the Sunday of the third week of August in 1998 would be any different than the others.



Every family has their own trials and challenges. For my family, coping with the presence of sexual assault in our lives has always been a collaborative struggle. We have pushed through the hurt and pain in remembering where we have been because we have each

other to carry us along the journey. I could never have told this story alone. Bochner (2013) sums it up,

In practice, autoethnography is not so much a methodology as a way of life. It is a way of life that acknowledges contingency, finitude, embeddedness in a story's being, encounters with Otherness, an appraisal of ethical and moral commitments, and a desire to keep conversation going. (p. 53)

My words and memories are so sparse, but my family's words are so rich in meaning. I have never existed as an independent unit. I never will. I need my family now more than ever to tell this story for healing, not only for ourselves but for others. If more families knew that they could talk about their experiences, I hope that they would. Words have the power to heal, to relive, to share, and to cope. The biggest leap of faith is to say the first word. In the following chapter, I turn to the struggles and joys that my family and I faced in working through a relational autoethnography. The work we do is important, but the experiences we have while doing it are essential. In life, in learning, in autoethnography, we evolve and grow.

Summary

This chapter creates a space for my family and me to tell our memories and stories of sexual assault. Through the collaboration in our relational autoethnography, sexual assault moves from hidden confinement to a sphere of public dialogue where memories and stories can be shared. In piecing together the emotions, recollections, and fragmented experiences that we have endured as a family, this work helps to show the importance of voice over silence. This chapter shares moments of everyday life that (re)shape our memories and

(re)tell our stories in order to temporarily understand the impact sexual assault can have on a family. In talking, in sharing, and in living, we heal from our pasts.

CHAPTER 4

REMEMBERING STORIES ABOUT REMEMBERING STORIES

As I reflect upon the moments that my family and I have spent in dialogue about sexual assault, I realize that it has been a process of imaging, remembering, sharing, trying to understand, and then (re)imagining again. The journey in writing this thesis has brought us to momentary recognition of the difficult conversations, hurtful emotions, inspiring realizations, and exciting aesthetic moments that have encompassed the process of remembering. This chapter is a collection of stories about writing with family members.

Writing Stories about Writing Stories

Remembering in union with the process of (re)writing, reflexivity allows for my family and I to pause in the progression, to contemplate the memories being recollected. As I work through the thoughts, emotions, and words that my family and I have shared throughout the writing of this thesis, I often find small glimmers of healing in my reflection upon our conversations. When sharing stories of these moments with my family members, I discovered that, they, too, have responded with moments of epiphany. Richardson (1995; 1997) coined the term “writing-story” to describe the stories that we write about how texts are constructed. So much of the reflexivity that shapes this thesis is derived from the moments of our reflexion on how stories are told and received. Through the telling of stories about telling stories, larger numbers of people are exposed to our narratives.

Today is the day that the final draft of this thesis is to due to my committee. As I sit at my computer, I am still not satisfied with my lack of explanation about why it is so important to talk about sexual assault. Beth calls me. I know that I need to be working and time is ticking, but I answer anyway. She tells me that she was just talking to one of our mutual

acquaintances. “She saw your post on Facebook a few weeks ago. She says she has been thinking about you non-stop. She says that she wants to say something but doesn’t know what to say. She tells me that she can relate.” I can hear my sister smiling on the other end of the phone line, and I find that I, myself, am smiling too. It is a beautiful moment when someone else makes the connection between the silence that we have been forced to keep in sexual assault and the importance of breaking that silence. Beth continues,

Lauren, think about it. Write this down. The more people that we tell about telling our stories to each other, the more people that will tell others. This is a chain reaction.

Our family was so important to this process because we can share our thoughts so much quicker than just you can as an individual.

I contemplate her words. I wonder how many people have already begun talking about sexual assault because of the stories that my family and I have shared. Tears fill my eyes, a smile fills my face, and I know that the importance of telling stories about telling stories is real, thriving, and beautiful. This chapter is an embrace of those moments of remembering stories about remembering stories.

Stories of Feeling Exposed

Poulos (2009) warns us that “composing and crafting an ethnographic tale is, in large part, a leap of faith” (p. 46). Not knowing what will happen, what will be effected by this work, or what changes will occur in our relationships, my family and I have taken a large leap of faith in talking about our experiences with sexual assault. Exposed. That is the word that we have used. This thesis has exposed so much of us—our family, our lives, our secrets. Exposed. Nobody actually exposes themselves willingly—do they? Why would a family want to tell their secrets to the world? “I feel exposed.” Her words ring in my ears

throughout the day. I started off the morning happy; it only took her phone call to bring me back down. All day long I kept quiet and pondered that word-exposed. I want to be mad at her comment, but I know that she is right. This thesis most certainly will expose our family.

I think about Richardson's (1990) words when she says, "People make sense of their lives through the stories that are available to them, and they attempt to fit their lives into the available stories" (p. 129). I cannot help but wonder if my family and I are not only scared of being exposed to the world, but also scared to be exposed to ourselves. This process of talking through memories has shown us so much more of who we are and where we have been. So many details of my life that I never knew existed are now circling in my mind on a daily basis. It's a scary thing to show yourself to the world, but it can be even more frightening to look in the mirror and not recognize who you see. The realization that you are more than you can control and that you exist in the minds and memories of other individuals can be both intriguing and disturbing.

I think about my family's experiences and stories and how we tell about them. Adams (2008) prompts me to wonder, who has narrative privilege? For the past 16 years, the telling of our experiences has, in a large part, seemed to come only from my parents in very select and secretive situations. Mom tells me that, "Beth and Kendra never would talk about this." Beth says, "We did not talk about this openly between us until you were a senior in high school." I cannot place a time or date on when I started feeling the urge to expose our secrets and tell our stories. I am not sure that I ever felt like I could or that I should. For a time, I think I believed that this was *my* story to tell. If I could endure the hurt and the shame of talking about my sexual assault, then I should have the freedom to do so.

As I started college, I began finding liberation to talk and tell about my experiences, but as time went on I began to realize that this is not *my* story—this is *our* story. When I finally understood that I could not and should not tell this story from only my perspective, I longed for my family to experience the same liberation in vocalization as I had. So here we are. As a family we have begun to embrace opportunities to talk about sexual assault. Even still we are feeling scared, exposed, and afraid. Whose story is this to tell and when is the right time to tell it? I share in Poulos's (2008) experiences when he says, "The meaning we share in our stories is, it turns out, a core part of my sense of who I am in this world, how I became who I am" (p. 475). I realize that the story of my assault will always live on in many, many people. I realize that this story will always be my story, my family's story, and all of our story.

I have found the courage to write from narratives told by Adams (2011), Bolen (2014), Ellis (1993), Poulos (2008), Rambo Ronai (1995), and so many more. I (re)live their stories and their experiences with them each time that I turn the page in their writings and I hope that you, the reader, can do the same with them and me. I write, my family writes, because we want our story to bring courage to you in the narratives that you wish to tell. We want you to know that families *can* talk about the hurtful times in their lives. We want you to know that autoethnography is a place where you can find freedom in expression, so we write.

Story Must Overcome Secret

It's hard to imagine how many people I have encountered that have been through sexual assault. Few have told their stories to me, some have allowed me to talk with them about their experiences, but I cannot even fathom how many pass in silence. The secret burdens of sexual assault that pass me on the sidewalk, which I never see or acknowledge,

are uniquely significant to me. I think of the countless individuals who have said to me, “I cannot believe that you were sexually assaulted. I had no idea.” Rambo Ronai (1995) reminds me that few people want to talk about these things and ,therefore, a very limited vocabulary exists for them in our society. Rambo Ronai exposes our willingness to discount experiences such as sexual assault as something that is abnormal, yet more common than we are willing to admit.

I wonder how many of my friends and family members are living in this world of silence about their own sexual assault. I want to be a voice for the muted. I want to believe that I stand up to the silence and shatter it with my words, but I know better than to believe that I have done this. My mind goes back to the night that I first told my soon-to-be-in-laws that I had been sexually assaulted. My voice quivered as I searched the empty bank of words in my head to describe my experiences. There was not a starting point in the scrambled memories in my head. There is no manual for discussing sexual assault with your in-laws. I am sure our conversation was awkward. I cannot recall what words I used or what stories I told, but I remember clearly the courage that it took me to admit my past. I am ashamed that it took me months after getting engaged to be open about my past with my future-in-laws, but I know that being vocal about sexual assault comes one step at a time. Knowing the courage it has taken for me, someone who *wants* to talk about sexual assault, to speak out about my experiences, I sympathize with those who are leery of doing so. However, I cannot remind myself enough that the strength in our words must overcome the frailty in our silence. Change will not happen if change is not spoken about. Healing in our society cannot flourish until the past has been identified. Poulos (2008) encapsulates my enthusiasm when he says,

“In the end, I will suggest that the power of story trumps the power of the secret.” We must tell our stories, and we must embrace the stories of others.

Answering to the Stories that We Tell

I acknowledge that my experiences with sexual assault are not only my story to tell but a story that my entire family should be able to partake in. Through the dialogue that we have experienced in writing this thesis, the privilege in telling narratives (Adams, 2008) is now shared more openly within our family, but this has sparked a new debate. Now we ask, “Whose burden is it to answer the difficult and hurtful questions that arise from our telling?” I have always hoped that people would feel at ease in sharing with me their stories of sexual assault. I have always hoped that other would understand that I am willing and open to questions that they may have about my own. As we collaborate on this work, I remind my family time and time again that they will not offend me by asking questions. I want to encourage conversation and inquiries, but I know everyone in my family is not in the same place with processing the assault as I am. It has taken me 16 years to find the courage to talk about my assault without fears and tears always being present. I know that we each heal and come to momentary understandings in our own time. I realize that answering questions about a secret, sensitive family experience can be difficult and scary.

For years, answering has never been an issue. If people do not know, they will not ask. Over the past 12 months, I have been standing in front of rooms full of people and sharing my experiences with sexual assault and my frustrations with the misunderstandings of how assault affects me. Because I was speaking alone, my family was not questioned. However, now I am bringing them with me into a place of extreme vulnerability. Now my family has to answer to the questioning individuals that are learning about the assault for the

first time. Talking about sexual assault is no longer something that happens only at home, only behind closed doors, only on paper, or only in the confounds of our phone calls-our experience with sexual assault has gone social. And now is when it gets tough.

McNay (2009) tells us, “Whether the content of a story is valued negatively or is morally neutral, or whether it is relevant to those who are uninformed about it or immaterial, there are no easy answers to questions about if, when, or how a secret should be disclosed (p. 1184). This inquiry has aided me in taking a step forward closer to my goal of bringing the conversation of sexual assault out into the world. Although my family and I still struggle on making the decision to answer the questions that we face in connection to the assault, I am overjoyed that we are now at least considering that those questions can and should be answered. Coming to vocalization about sexual assault is a process and we must take it one step at a time.

Words Mean Different Things to Different People

I have never been able to find the right combination of words to describe my experiences. “Sexual assault” was never a descriptor that we used in our family. We didn’t know what to say, so we settled on calling it *the-Zane-thing*. In my teenage years, when I began trying to make sense of my past, I was again at a loss for words. I could never explain my feelings to a stranger by saying the-Zane-thing, and I certainly couldn’t Google it to find guidance in my confusion. The first time that I remember contemplating that my experiences could be called sexual assault, I realized why my family never talked about the-Zane-thing. Beth would tell me that she always called it sexual abuse. Kendra would say that she now believes it was sexual assault because I was in a situation where someone tried to have sexual contact with me without my consent. My father would ask what the difference was. I would

not know what to say. Like Minge (2007), I recognize that my body does not represent what happened to me but the experiences and memories do live deep inside of me. My family remembers the events in color, but our language is only a stark black and white. The story cannot be told with emotion because our words are hallowed and empty. Letters and syllables and words and sentences will never encapsulate what we actually want to say. My mom tells me that she does not like those two words—sexual assault. She tells me that she cannot bear to say them. I wonder how can words have so much power?

I think about our language and the words that we use. Some words can have so many different meanings. Even when we use a word in the same context as another person, the emotion and expression behind our intentions can be quite different. I think about Kendra telling me, “Answering questions that you have about the assault can be difficult because I know that the words I use can mean something very different to you.” How true that is. Bochner (2007) suggests that we think about our language in this way,

The pertinent ethical question we must ask is, ‘Where do we draw the line between the terms we use to describe our ways of thinking about the meaning of one’s actions now, and the intentions that motivated these actions then?’ (p. 200)

It is easy to look back at what we call sexual assault and wonder how any individual could do such a thing to a child. It is vital that we remember that the language we use today, very well is different from the language that we used 16 years ago. The language that was used by the guy who assaulted me may be very different from the words that I choose to describe the experience. I cannot help but wonder if he has ever thought about this as sexual assault. More importantly, I should ask myself if it even matters if those are the words that he uses. Do the words that we use change our experience? Bochner (2000) reminds me that “the purpose of

self-narrative is to extract meaning from experience rather than to depict experience exactly as it was lived” (p. 270). Why then am I searching for the full story, the complete memory, or the accurate account of what happened? I know that none of those things will ever exist because we can only comprehend what we know through the preface of what we have already experienced. I think about my dad saying, “He didn’t know what he was doing. He was a 16-year-old guy. He had an urge and he didn’t know how to handle it.” The perspectives of the assault are so different and so various, even in my own family. I cannot pretend to know what actually happened the day of the assault or the motivation behind what happened that day. All I can do is tell our story, know that the dialogue that happens in my family is essential to healing, and hope that other families will realize that they, too, can and should have different perspectives and memories of sexual assault.

I embrace this process of remembering with family and speaking in a language that we can all envelop. Autoethnography engenders a space where I can write with my family, who are not in the academy, and share our experiences in an accessible manner. It is not about the complexity of the words you use, but the use of words that do not need complexity to be meaningful. This inquiry has been a project of collaboration from minds of different education levels, and together we have assembled a collection of fragmented memories that can be shared with anyone. Remembering together paves a new road for discourse and conversation about sexual assault. Now, we must realize that the next step of the process is to share these words with the world.

Stories of Memory and Time

The World Wide Web became popular in 1990. I was born in 1992. In 1998, I was sexually assaulted by a family friend. Today, in 2014, I sit at my computer, Google searching

his name. This is not the first time that my keyboard has typed this search. In 2010, I began to let the internet expose the person who I had spent the last 12 years forgetting. I wondered who he was. State records tell me that until 2008, he was a registered sex-offender. County records tell me that in 2011 he was issued a ticket for fishing without a license. I try to ignore the memory of the day that he assaulted me. I try to forget that we were at the river and that we had gone fishing. I search further. I find a mug shot and for the first time I put a face to the name. I click on the picture, but the page prompts me to pay \$10.95 for more in-depth records. A part of me wants to reach for my wallet, but I do not. I let \$10.95 separate me from knowing who he is. My memories are enough.

Throughout this inquiry I have questioned myself many times. I hoped that by the end I could believe that I had realized my presence and its influence in the project. I know that I must continue to evolve as a writer and as person in order to feel my own tangibility in the world. Finding voice for my stories is important. Remembering lost thoughts is beautiful, and understanding yourself in relationship to your experiences is essential. The healing that this inquiry has brought to my life personally is more than enough reward, but I continue to look forward in search for how it can heal others. As time goes on, I know that I must realize that my place in the world changes, and as I inquire further into the depths of autoethnography, I hope to evolve as well.

Time is such a strange phenomenon. We live our daily lives based on time. I cannot fathom time in relation to this assault. As I sit and try to remember the events of that day, all of my thoughts are jumbled in my head. I want to understand the chronological order of events and memories inside of me, but I am always frustrated by the constraints of time in relation to my memory. Poulos (as cited in Tullis Owen, McRae, Adams, & Vitale, 2008)

tells me, “Memories are pieces of memories, stories are pieces of stories. They are often interrupted in various ways either by the memory, the secret of the story, or by something else that takes you away from it” (p. 194). In conversations with my family, I have learned various details about the days and months following the assault. I try to conceptualize these stories and put them in some type of order that makes sense in my head. Nothing works. I begin to understand that as much as we try, we cannot and should not measure our memories based on time. Although time can collect memories, our memories cannot be bound by time. As we move forward in life, our memories may change, the times may change, but one thing will remain the same, our childhood selves are still a part of us today, and we must embrace the presence of the past in today and in the future.

As I think about the way that my memories have changed over time, I cannot overlook the tiny, disheveled teddy bear that sits on a stack of books on my bookshelf. Although I cannot recollect much about the visits I made to counselors and abuse outreach services as a child, I do remember the teddy bear that I received from my counselor during a visit. Of all of the stuffed animals that lined the shelves from which I got to choose, I can clearly remember a small, firm brown teddy bear sitting in the back corner of the shelf with his legs dangling over the edge. I remember taking the teddy bear to school with me after I finished the visit and returned back to my classroom. When I got home that afternoon, I took the teddy bear to my mother because its leg had fallen off. I don’t remember ever playing with the bear again.

During Christmas of 2012, as my family and I sat on the living room floor opening gifts, my sisters and I received wooden hope chests made by our father and filled with our childhood toys. As we excitedly opened our chests and dug through the memories that lay

inside, I found the brown teddy bear tucked away in the back corner of the box. With tears in my eyes, I pulled out the scraggly brown bear and wrapped him up in my arms. I never expected for a tiny stuffed animal from 14 years before to bring me comfort in my process of healing as I held it in my arms and imagined myself at the age of six picking out the bear for the first time. To this day, the teddy bear sits on my bookshelf in my office, reminding of the memories that it has relinquished from my past. Although we cannot measure time or the memories that time encompasses, we will always find images, objects, smells, sounds, and teddy bears that help us realize how much we have been through and how much we have overcome.

Throughout the process of writing this thesis, my family and I have found new ways of remembering and recollecting. It is not always words on pages or scholarly articles in journals that bring us back to an experience and help us find healing. This thesis has become a new way for us to approach dialogue, to approach healing. If the words we write are never experienced by anyone else, then we can still know that this process of writing has brought healing to our family.

The Way You Tell Your Stories Will Affect How People Respond

It just got real! This just got real! The sexual assault that my family has been coping with for 16 years just now got real. The past year of preparing my thesis did not make it real. The past six weeks of talking with my family did not make it real. The tears that I have shed every night this week did not make it real. It was my Facebook post that made it real:

The greatest part about writing a collaborative autoethnography with your family for your master's thesis (aside from the healing wonders that dialogue helps manifest) is their presence in every bit of the long hours of writing. What an amazing family I

have been given! Tears fill my eyes as I read your words of struggle and frustration in working through memories of sexual assault. Our story can and will help others.

Thank you for helping me share it. – with Dad, Beth Owens, Kendra Jones, and Brenda Moeller

It's very rare that I find the courage to post my thoughts on sexual assault to any social media outlets. But last night, as I sat working on my thesis, the urge to share my family's words prompted me to write this status. I expected the typical "Thank you" and "You're brave" responses, but what I did not expect or anticipate was the tangibility that my thesis took on at that moment. Only two days later, my sister called to tell me that three people had approached her about the assault after I posted the status. She said, "I did not know what to say. It caught me really off guard. I felt exposed. This is something we will all have to answer to from now on." I admit that I didn't fully think through the effects of my status or in a larger scheme, my thesis. But at the time same time, I am fully aware of the effects.

I knew that I wanted people to start talking more about sexual assault. I knew that I wanted the world to know that families could and should talk about these types of experiences. I knew that I wanted to be vulnerable, but what I did not realize were these "people" who I wanted to start talking about sexual assault are the same people I see from day-to-day. I didn't stop to think that publicly recognizing my family in connection with sexual assault would cause people to start asking *them* questions. I wanted to be vulnerable, but when the time came, I realized that it was much harder than I ever thought it would be. Maybe I *have* shown the world more about my family than I anticipated, but maybe that's exactly what my family and the world needed to see.

Remembering can be difficult and emotional. Although this process of recollection with my family has not always been the most pleasant or the easiest, it has allowed us to find our own place in the memories that encompass our lives. I have seen myself in their memories, and in turn, I have found them in mine. We all, always, are a part of each other and when we are able to embrace that concept and realize our presence in others, autoethnography becomes a place for growth.

Embodying Personal Narrative

I contemplate the places that I find most comfort in writing. I have tried numerous coffee houses, my work office, my home office, outside on the porch swing, in my bathtub, and in my bed. I can imagine the countless hours that I have spent sitting in front of my computer with a blank stare, a blank screen, and a blank mind. Like Richardson (1999), I write about how it feels for my body to be positioned in various locations as I think/write. The notepad on my phone is filled with fragmented thoughts that often come to me in places where a word document cannot go. As I visit them and revisit them, I try to imagine the emotions that inspired the thought. Back in front of my laptop, I seek to bleed the stories that come to me throughout the day, often with little success. I am inspired by the telling of stories that comes to me as I walk through the grocery store, run around the gym, pump my gas, and take out the trash. The telling of stories throughout an ordinary day reminds me of the ways in which our memories appear and disappear throughout life. I find a sense of comfort in sharing my stories of sexual assault as they arise throughout my day, and I wake each morning wondering if the day will bring such opportunities. While the words that appear on my paper seem to be the body of this thesis, I recognize that it is my body (re)living experiences and (re)collecting stories in lived life that have given this work

purpose. In telling the stories of sexual assault and living out their effects, this inquiry moves from a flat surface to a three-dimensional narrative, and this is the space where writing touches lives.

Time Will Change Our Memories

It's strange how dates on the calendar can be so meaningless and also so important. It bothers me that a specific week that has never haunted me before, now glares back at me when I look at the month of August. I always knew that it happened in the fall. My counselor once told me that the smells and sounds of the falling leaves may unconsciously trigger my memories. But when Dad so insistently reminded my mother that it happened the third week of August, I started dreading that week. Today is Sunday of the third week of August. I will never look through a yearly calendar again without pausing on today. This date that was so meaningless for the last 15 years now seems to mock me from my desk calendar. But yet, here I sit, almost happy that I know what happened on this day. It's strange how dates on the calendar can be so meaningless and also so important.

One of the most fascinating parts of memory is their ever-present ability to fluxuate constantly. I have realized time and time again, that as my family shares their stories and memories, my thoughts on the assault seem to change. What I know and remember about this experience today is so drastically different than it was two years ago when I began researching sexual assault. When I moved to college, I took all of my high school yearbooks with me. Sometimes my sister and I would open them and laugh at how goofy our 90's outfits looked. We would slam the book shut when we got to that crowning picture of our awkward junior high days. Our favorite was to read the smeared ink in cracks of pages, around circled pictures and covering any spot left white where our schoolmates could expose

our secrets and wishes for the future. But after my sister went home, I did not put the books away. I would sit cross-legged on my bedroom floor, rubbing my fingers over the smooth gold covers of the books. When I found the confidence, I would gently flip from page to page, a little scared of what I was looking for but a little relieved knowing what was actually waiting for me. And then, when I got to the page where it was, I would always stop and tears would come to my eyes. Of all the faces looking back at me, his never did. I only saw the words, “Not pictured.” Then I would close the book once again, put it back in its place on the shelf, and not think about the grey smiley face next to his name, until my sister came over again.

Talking to and with Family is Not Easy

I contemplate telling the story of my sexual assault to my family. When I was in junior high, I was told that a person that I was close to had also been sexually assaulted. For years I have wanted to write her a letter to tell her that I understand the weird thoughts and memories that can appear throughout life. I want her to know that she is not alone. I wonder if anyone has ever told her my story. I ask often what actually happened on the day she was assaulted. No one ever answers my question. I wonder if she has ever been made fun of or teased or asked, “Why me?” I think of so many things that I want to say to her, but I never write the letter.

Sometimes the most unexpected things can help ease us into conversations that we have been unwilling to face for many years. Although it may appear that dialogue within families should not be a struggle, the reality is far from so. I think about my senior year in high school. My oldest sister Beth was living four hours away from home. Kendra was going to college in a town nearby, and I was alone at home with Mom and Dad. Although we have

always been relatively close, our age differences have kept my sisters and me from really bonding. I never felt the closeness with them that allowed me to find the comfort I needed to talk about the assault. Kendra tells me, “Honestly, you and I never talked about what happened until the last few years. I remember being very confused in my role as a sister at that time because our family never really talked about what happened.” I think about the night that the three of us got to spend together in Lubbock where Beth was living at the time.

Always being the type of daughters who obeyed, students that followed the rules, and individuals that sought to please other people, my sisters and I were never ones to make decisions that we thought might frustrate others. The night that we decided to get matching sisterhood tattoos, we took a leap of faith in doing something that bonded us together, despite what feedback we may get.

Beth says, “We did not talk about the sexual assault openly between us until you were a senior in high school. The night that we got our matching tattoos, was the night that we finally were open about it between us and we finally started bonding.” Although it may seem strange that ink on skin could be something that sparks dialogue, I find comfort in knowing that my sisters, and I found the courage to share our stories with each other on a Saturday night in a dark tattoo parlor making impulsive decisions to permanently mark our kinship. I will never be able to explain to another individual how important that tiny tattoo on the inside of my left foot is to my life. I can never tell someone that the brown swirls of the Celtic sisterhood symbol (the image that divides the sections in this thesis) etched into my skin was what sparked the (re)collection of memories with my sisters from my childhood assault. Talking to and with family is not always easy, but there is beauty in the moments when we least expect dialogue to appear, yet out of nowhere, like our memories often do, it resurfaces

and reminds us of the bond that we share. I encourage you not to overlook the simple moments in life that bring you closer to others through everyday events that can spark conversations and healing.

Just Because You Want To Do It, Does Not Mean It Will Be Easy

I sit on my living room floor surrounded by scraps of paper. What used to be several pages are now scattered around me in many fragments. I attempt to sort them by topic and by author. Some are on colored slips of paper to represent a specific conversation. Some are on sticky notes because they are ideas that came to me after my computer had been shut down. For several hours I have sat here trying to arrange and rearrange the contents of this thesis. I keep reminding myself how Rath (2012) describes messy texts, "...Where the embodied and reflexive narrative impulses create writing that necessarily disrupts, disorders and unsettles" (p. 495). I contemplate the value in disorder and wonder how a thesis can be written from slivers of paper and slivers of life. Is it possible that these thoughts and ideas can be written in so many different orders and still make sense?

My memories and recollections swirl in my mind. I cannot find order to the madness of thought and experience. I want people to understand that my family's thoughts and memories cannot be organized, cannot be structured, and cannot be solidified. Yet I am burdened with trying to organize, structure and solidify the words in this thesis so that others can understand and grow with us in our experiences. I want so badly to do this, but that does not make it any easier. Holman Jones (2005) reminds me that, "Life stories are created and recreated in the moment of their story telling" (p. 774). So I pursue further. I have come to dread my desk and my computer. I avoid writing at any cost. My heart is burning with desire to tell our story, but my fingers are far from willing to write it down. Due dates loom above

me and yet I refuse to put a time limit on emotion and difficult memory. I just keep saying, “You cannot put an expiration date on expression.” Yet I know that I must. I started this project because I ate, slept, and breathed the possibility of talking about sexual assault with my family. Now all I do is eat, sleep, and breathe dread. The time is here to take action and now I am not ready.

Summary

As I continue remembering and (re)imagining the experiences in my past, I take with me the stories that my family has revealed. I know that remembering is always a process and never a finish line that is reached. I will pursue the journey of recollection and endure the emotions that come with my memories. This thesis has shown me how important it is to talk, to listen, to remember, and to share; now these are my goals. In telling stories about telling stories, I move forward in healing from sexual assault.

CHAPTER 5

MEMORIES DO NOT END

Working Toward Goals

In the first chapter of this thesis, I introduce the ideas of messy texts (Marcus, 1994), layered accounts (Rambo Ronai, 1995), and autoethnography as methods of understanding the events in our lives. In working through and among these various methods, this chapter creates a space for Chapter 2, Chapter 3, and Chapter 4 to unfold. In Chapter 1, I also set goals for this inquiry. My first goal was to seek to understand how the self is critical to understanding one's position in the world. Second, I sought to explore the origins of memory and how those recollections come together to function as a collaborative effort in family memory. My third goal for this inquiry was to embrace the interconnectedness of the individual within the family and the family within the individual. The final goal that I set for this inquiry was to work toward creating a space where people can talk about their experience with sexual assault.

In Chapter 2 of this thesis, I began to look at the fragments of my own memory that have surfaced over the past 16 years. In writing through the memories I have collected, the thoughts that I have had, and the emotions that have come over me; this chapter tells the story of both a six-year-old girl and her understandings of sexual assault and a graduate student still seeking to make sense of what happened as a child. By working through the moments of remembrance in my own mind, I was then able to have my family members join me in the next chapter in recollecting our memories as a family.

The third chapter of this thesis is a collaboration of memories from and about my family. In the process of dialogic conversation and memory recollection, our experiences

with sexual assault are pieced together by fragments of thought. As a family, we realize that we are unable to tell our story alone, rather by including the experiences and emotions of each family member, we are able to talk about sexual assault from many different perspectives. It is through grappling with various perspectives that this chapter evolves as a messy text (Marcus, 1993) narrative of sexual assault.

The fourth chapter is a compilation of remembering stories about remembering stories through writing stories (Richardson, 1997). Although our experiences of sexual assault are important to healing, I also feel that it is essential to understand the influences that our telling of stories can have. In telling stories about my family and me telling stories, I find a space where the process of healing with sexual assault is vibrant and the struggles of coping are visible. This chapter allows for reflexivity and the essentiality of its presence.

Working through Goals

As I look back upon the goals that I set for myself in this inquiry, I realize that hoping to attain a certain goal in work like this is irrational. However, I find moments of both joy and frustration in the process of working through memory with family.

I start with a frustration. I think about autoethnography and the possibilities that it made imaginable for this thesis. Goodall (2000) tells me, “It should expand your mind. It should open locks, provide pathways, offer a language capable of inspiring personal, social, and instrumental liberation. I think it should help people behave differently, if they choose to” (pp. 193-194). This method has embraced me and my family and given us the courage to tell our stories about sexual assault. I return the embrace because I know that this work is a process of healing and storytelling through autoethnography. Although it is not always easy, and often times memory recollections can be a fragile thing, telling narratives from the past

offers a helping hand to others. As I review the pages and chapters that have evolved from this writing process, the underlying strengths of autoethnography have emerged. My family and I have now found voice, even if only momentarily or softly. We now understand that it is possible and helpful to remember collaboratively as a family. We can now recognize the fragmented forms that memories may encompass, and we find hope for remembering in their fragments. Although autoethnography holds the hearts of my family and me, I cannot help but question the wrong doings I have allowed myself to impose upon the method.

I contemplate the way in which I have decided to engage in conversation with the members of my family. I have tried hard to find time alone with each of them. I have been fearful of what moments will arise in the conversations. I cannot help but wonder if I am missing something in this work. The whole idea of this thesis is to navigate through the familial experience of sexual assault, so why am I trying to isolate my conversations? What does it say about the way that I perceive my family's memories? I wonder if this project has been a failure. I wonder if what I have done is only a process of healing, but then I also question my use of "only" in the impact of this work. My family and I have grown together in our remembrance. The hard times, the hurtful words, the dreaded conversations, and the embraced questions have all lead us to find slivers of healing in our journey through sexual assault. I realize that this journey is not just about what I have felt, what I have wanted, or what I have written. Rather, this has been a process of what my family has felt, my family has wanted, and my family has written. As an individual, this work would have never been possible, but with my family, this thesis emerged. In allowing autoethnography to expose a family is a very vulnerable step toward healing. I embrace the stories and recollections from

my family because they come from such raw and honest places that really reveal the hurts and happiness that sexual assault has brought to our family.

Kendra says, “We cannot blame ourselves like we have been doing. This thesis has shown us the importance in writing down our thoughts. Most importantly, it has helped us realize that we should tell our family that we love them.” Conversations that I never thought my family would be able to have, we had through this process. Words that I never imagined would come from the mouths of my family members were spoken and uncovered.

Dad tells me, “If you go could go back and write this thesis on something else, I wouldn’t want you to change a thing. This has shown me that things don’t just happen, pass, and disappear.”

Beth says, “This process has taught me to respect each family member in our differences and to recognize that we all have a different role in remembering the past. This has been important in teaching us that our roles change and evolve.” The healing that autoethnography can offer to families is vibrant and fresh, and I will be forever thankful that my family and I are able to share in its warmth. Most of all, I treasure that autoethnography has revealed to my family and me the importance of continuing our work and understanding that an “ending” is not the goal.

Mom’s words say it all, “I thought that this process of writing your thesis would be therapeutic, and then we would all be able to put this behind us. I realize now that was never the intentions, and I am so thankful that this journey has helped me realize that we’re never done healing and we’re never done sharing.” If it be that this thesis never reaches another desk, another computer screen, or another pair of ears, my family and I can still find

happiness in knowing that the process of writing this work has begun to open our eyes to the experiences of our family and the healing that we have begun to embrace.

As I have journeyed through discovering autoethnography, there have been moments when I step away from my computer in awe of the overwhelming sense of healing that writing can spark. I do this not because of the words that I have written or typed, but because in these moments I get to experience the warm fuzzies of autoethnography. I recall multiple days when I would leave my computer and step away to do other chores, only to find that my mind stayed back at my keyboard and my heart stayed back on the page. I treasure the moments that I am driving down the street and feel as though I will always have autoethnography to turn to when I want to express hurt, fear, happiness, or love. The warm fuzzies of autoethnography can wrap me up in their presence and allow me to feel an ambition for impacting the world that nothing else has ever allowed me to experience, and being able to share that with my family is a feeling I will never forget.



Looking Forward

My writing is not perfect. In fact, sometimes it is down right rough and disastrous. There have been moments when I wanted to take an entire chapter and throw into the trashcan, and there were times when I have. I have come to realize that the significance in autoethnography is not eloquent writing, linguistic achievements, or flawless sentence structure. The significance in writing autoethnography is that you wrote it. The best part of telling stories and remembering is that you told stories and you remembered. As I read the words in Chapter 3 to Beth, she told me words that she had once heard, “Imperfections are not inadequacies.” Although this work is cluttered and fragmented and disheveled, the

dialogue and the healing that has risen from the ashes of our memories will fill our world a little bit at a time. I cannot pretend to be any more of a professional writer than my parents or my sisters. Their extraordinary words and recollections made this thesis a possibility. Their expertise comes from the heart, not the keyboard, not books, or not articles. Although I have been fortunate enough to receive my educational training in the field of communication, my family has embraced the methods and theories that only the field can offer for working through traumatic experiences. This thesis turned from a communication project to a project that has helped all of us treasure the communication in our family. I hope that as the field of communication continues to evolve and move forward, autoethnography can continue to be a place where families and individuals come to make (and re-make) meaning of their experiences. Academic work is important, but if we do not share our work with others, then how can we reach the large demographic of people affected by sexual assault? I challenge you, as I challenge myself, to move toward a place where inquiries can be shared, understanding can be given freely, and experiences can be embraced to make sense of the world that we live in.



I sit at the computer in my office on a Friday afternoon. Unable to focus on my work, I open my Facebook account. I have done this many, many times. Facebook search—no results. Google search—only court records. Today, I am exactly one week away from the final due date of my thesis. As I scroll through the statuses and pictures in my Facebook newsfeed, I pass over a local news article about sex offenders in my area. This is certainly not the first time I have seen something like this. Normally, I wouldn't give the article a second thought, but today I can feel my fingers urging me to type his name in the search bar.

Knowing the results I have found every time before, I let myself type his name. Facebook search—no results. Feeling brave today, I open a new webpage and pursue further. This time, I google his name, and as expected—only court records. I click through page after page after page, and then I see something that makes my clicking stop, my heart skip a beat, my eyes tear up, and my hands shake. There, on the screen, I see a link to a Facebook page that I have never seen before. I close my eyes, take a deep breath, and try to calm my nerves, but nothing can prepare me for what I see when I open them. Staring back at me from the screen are the same grey eyes that I remember fearing 16 years ago. And just when I thought the healing process was done, that pair of eyes looking me directly in the face reminds me that this process is never meant to be finished, only to be continued.

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